SEPTEMBER 1993

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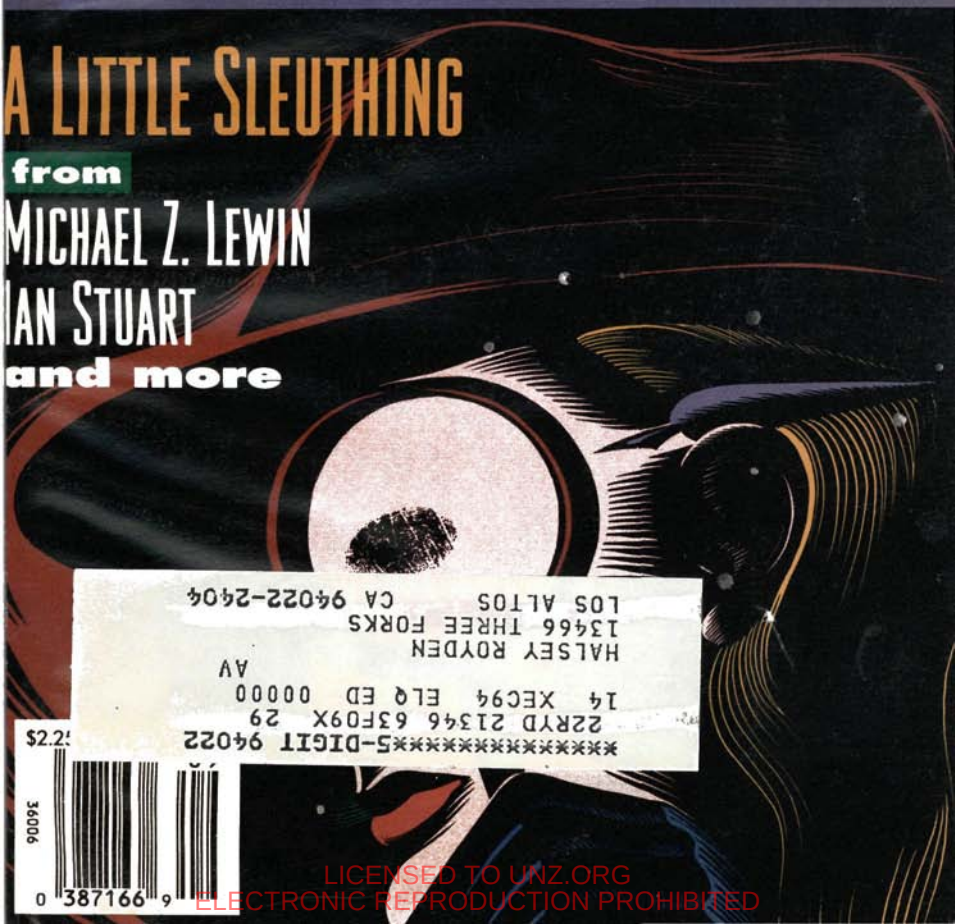
MYSTERY MAGAZINE



A LITTLE SLEUTHING

from

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IAN STUART

and more

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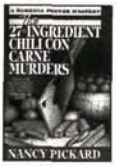

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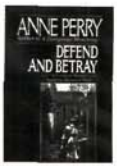

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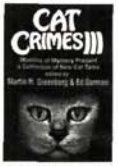

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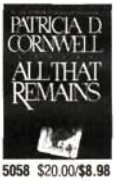

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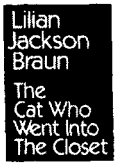

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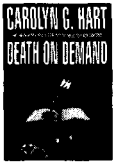

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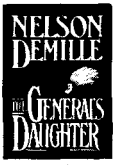

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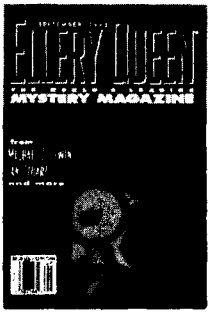

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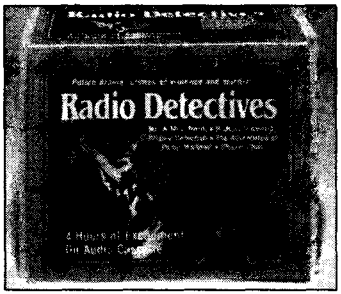

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a *NEW* short story by

MICHAEL Z. LEWIN

Here's a fun-poking, fanciful tale from American-born U.K. resident Michael Lewin that only an author equally at home on either side of the Atlantic could write . . .

THE STRANGER

by MICHAEL Z. LEWIN

As the bus pulled into Jesper, Indiana, the stranger took his Gladstone bag from the overhead rack. Almost alone on the bus, he was the only passenger to alight. As he passed the driver he said, "Thanks awfully. You gave us a smashing drive." The driver turned his head toward the voice, but the stranger had already begun to descend the steps to the new town.

Four people waited on the curb. The bus would continue in the direction of Bedford and Bloomington, eventually arriving in Indianapolis before dark. The fat man at the foot of the line made space for the stranger, but not a lot. Even so the stranger smiled and nodded to the man, and then he nodded to each of the other would-be passengers, all women. None gave him a second glance.

The bus stop in Jesper is on the main street. The stranger considered which direction to walk in and picked what seemed to be toward the middle of the town. As he walked he shifted his bag from one hand to the other and, later, back again. Finally he found a motel that seemed to be the only accommodation not part of a national chain. It was called the Sunrest and outside the door marked "Reception" he took a breath, lifted his chin, and muttered, "Jolly good." Then he walked in.

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A middle-aged couple shared a couch as they watched an early afternoon game show. As soon as they noticed the stranger, the woman turned the sound down by remote control and the man rose, walked to the reception counter, and said, "Do something for you, mister?"

"I believe you can, my good man," the stranger said. "But first, may one say this is a remarkably lovely town you reside in?"

The man took a moment to consider this unexpected response to his question. The stranger's voice caused the woman to look, and then rise from her chair.

Cautiously the man said, "You think so?"

"Oh I do!" the stranger said with enthusiasm. "The more one travels, the more one comes to appreciate the virtues of small, honest towns in the heartland of this wonderful country of yours. The people in such places recognize what's important in life and they concentrate on it. Family. Business. Hospitality. It's wonderful, truly refreshing."

"You talk funny," the man said.

From behind his shoulder the woman's head appeared. "You're English, huh?"

The stranger smiled broadly. "I am, madam, I am. You are remarkably perceptive, if one may say so."

"I've heard your kind of talk on the TV," the woman said. "He is, Glen. He's English!"

"English, huh?" Glen said. The tone of Glen's nasal voice was neutral but the face was welcoming. "My daddy was over there during the war. He was somewheres called Pontyfrat. You ever been to Pontyfrat?"

"I certainly have," the stranger said. "What an astonishing coincidence! I know Pontefract well."

"Well I'll be jiggered," Glen said. "Did you hear that, Edie? This here fella knows Pontyfrat."

"Welcome to Jesper, mister," Edie said. "So, what can we do for you?"

"To tell you the truth," the stranger said, "it's a slightly delicate matter."

"No credit," Glen said.

"It's nothing like that," the stranger said. "But my circumstances require considerable discretion. Although, if one may speculate, I'd wager that you both know how to be discreet. You strike one immediately as discreet people."

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"Yeah, well maybe," Glen said.

"What's this about, mister?" Edie said.

"I am taking a brief holiday, a vacation as you good folks would say. I need to get away from all the hurly-burly for a while, family pressures. You know the sort of thing?"

"We sure do know about family, all right," Edie said.

"And I must say," the stranger said, "I feel I have come to the right place. I *feel* it. Precisely the right place."

"You have?" Edie said.

"Because you've already shown me exactly the kind of discretion that I shall need if I am to spend a week or two in your best room."

The couple glanced at each other. Glen said, "And what discretion have we shown, mister? 'Cause so far Edie and me have treated you the same as we'd treat anybody that come through that door."

"That's it exactly!" the stranger said. "I will need your assurance that you will treat me precisely as you would treat any other resident in your establishment."

"I don't get you, mister," Glen said. "Is there some reason why we wouldn't?"

Edie studied the stranger's face.

"Excellent!" the stranger said with a smile. "No reason. No reason at all."

"Now you mention it," Edie said, "you do look kind of familiar."

"Please, madam, don't scour your memory any further." The stranger tugged at an oversized ear. He scratched his beaky nose. He rubbed the bald spot at the top of his head. "I really do need to remain entirely incognito. No newspapers. No television. Just your best room for a week, or perhaps two."

"Lord love me, I've got it!" Edie said.

"Please stop!" the stranger said. "Don't even say it. If you do, I shall have to find other premises and that will be a great disappointment, because we were getting along so well."

"Naw," Edie said, changing her mind and shaking her head. "It can't be. Not here in Jesper."

"Thank you for your understanding and your cooperation, madam. Truly, it is most appreciated."

The best room at the Sunrest was only better than the others because it was farther from the street. The stranger unpacked his few clothes and hung them in the closet. Next he enjoyed a hot shower. Then, with a clean shirt, he dressed again, suit, waistcoat, tie. With

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toilet paper he buffed up his shoes. Then he sat for a while on the bed.

Before long there was a hesitant tapping at his door. Immediately the stranger rose and opened to find Edie standing outside his room.

"Why hello," the stranger said. "What can I do for you?"

"Sorry to bother you, Mr. . . . Hey, is there something I can call you? I don't know what I'm supposed to say."

The stranger raised a hand and smiled. "Please. My friends call me Chuck."

"No kidding."

"And it would be my pleasure if you and your good husband were to do the same."

"Chuck. Wow!" Edie was giggly with pleasure. "And y'all call me Edie, and my husband's Glen."

"How do you do, Edie," the stranger said. He took one of her hands. He raised it and touched it lightly with his lips. "It is my very great pleasure to make your acquaintance. To tell you the truth, I was on the verge of coming to the office to ask you and Glen for another favour."

"You were?"

"But you've come here first. What can I do for you?"

"For me?"

"You knocked on the door for some reason."

"Oh, yeah. That. I wanted to check everything in the room was okay. You got enough towels and soap and stuff?"

"Everything is spiffing."

"Spiffing?"

"Perfect."

"Oh, great," Edie said. "But if anything goes wrong, you run out of paper or you want another towel, anything at all, you let me know, hear?"

"I will," the stranger said. "I won't hesitate. Thank you."

"So, why was you coming to the office?"

"I wanted a word with you and Glen. I'll meet you there in a couple of minutes. Okay?"

As the stranger entered the Sunrest Motel office, Glen and Edie stood behind the reception desk. Glen said, "Chuck, hi. What can we do for you?"

"First," the stranger said, "I want to keep from taking advantage of you."

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"How's that?" Glen said.

"Is it not customary, when an unknown traveller comes to a motel, for the traveller to make payment arrangements? I don't know how long I shall be able to stay here, of course, but it's only right that I pay in advance for my room tonight." From his wallet the stranger took a one-hundred-dollar bill. "Do you have change?"

Glen hesitated, but Edie said, "Shucks, we don't need that, Chuck."

"Well," the stranger said, "if you're sure." He put the money away and said, "There is also a favour I would appreciate, if you don't mind me asking."

"Y'all ask away," Edie said.

"I'd like some guidance."

"Guidance? About what?" Glen said.

"When I am away from home, what I enjoy, more than anything, is meeting people. Now, of course, in my situation it's rather difficult, but I thought that perhaps you two kind people would introduce me to a few of the local residents."

"You want to meet folks?" Edie said, eyes widening.

"Only if absolute discretion can be maintained," the stranger said. "But yes, I'd love to meet some of the good citizens of Jesper. Perhaps people in business like yourselves. Or people who entertain?"

Edie said, "So you wouldn't mind going to folks' houses, for dinner or a little party?"

"I wouldn't mind at all," the stranger said, "as long as—"

"No newspapers, no TV. Am I right?" Glen said.

"Hi. I'm Phil Hoechstadtler, Glen's second cousin and Commissioner of Oaths. Glad to have you aboard."

"It's very gracious of you to extend the invitation at such short notice, Phil," the stranger said.

"Oh hell, no problem with a barbecue. Just throw on another steak. All I got to know is what to call you when it's ready."

"Just call me Chuck," the stranger said. "And make mine medium rare."

"Come on through, Chuck," Hoechstadtler said. "Everybody is just dying to meet you."

"This is the most wonderful thrill for us," a woman said nervously as they shared the shelter of a maple upwind of the grill.

"Now, now, please!" the stranger said.

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"No, it is. We read all about England and everybody and we love them, everyone. Though of course some of them we love better than others."

"And what do you do . . . ?"

"Connie."

"Connie."

"Oh, I'm just a housewife."

"Don't say *just* a housewife. One can hardly have a more complex and intricate task than organising the daily running of a modern household."

"It can be quite a handful," Connie said. "Especially with three teenage boys."

"Mine are a bit younger than that," the stranger said.

"You got kids?" Connie asked.

"Yes, boys," the stranger said.

"Of course you do. Silly old me." Connie laughed nervously. "Of course, our house is no palace, or anything."

"So tell me, Chuck," Lenny Kahlenbeck said, "how come you chose a little dump like Jesper to honor with a visit?"

"You do Jesper an unkindness," the stranger said. "I think it's most attractive, and in a beautiful part of the state."

"You been through southern Indiana before?"

"Once or twice. Never Jesper before, however."

"And you really like it?"

"I certainly do, what I've seen of it."

"You . . . want to see around? I sell real estate, so I know my way around pretty good."

"Real estate? Property, you mean?"

"That's right," Kahlenbeck said proudly. "I'm not the biggest in Dubois County yet, but I'm on my way."

"Might that include holiday cottages?"

Kahlenbeck squinted. "You mean a vacation home?"

"That's it," the stranger said.

"You interested?"

"I certainly wouldn't mind looking at one or two."

"Hey, you're talking to the right man if you're looking for property in Dubois County. And take it from me, there's not a better part of the state to invest in right now."

* * *

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"I read somewhere that you like horses," said an elegantly dressed woman in her thirties. She carried a cocktail glass, but no paper plate of food.

"I can't imagine where you read that," the stranger said, "but it's true. I do like horses, very much."

"I'm Elvira Klingerman," the woman said. She offered her free hand.

The stranger lingered as he shook it. "I'm pleased to meet you, Elvira."

"They say I should call you Chuck and they say I shouldn't ask personal questions."

"I can see you've been well briefed, Elvira. And, I must say, you are an extremely lovely woman."

Elvira laughed. "They also said you were Mr. Charm. I can see why now."

"I do meet quite a lot of women, but it's such a pleasure to meet someone I can compliment sincerely."

There was a moment when neither of them spoke.

Then the stranger said, "Did you ask me about horses for a reason? Do you own some?"

"I do," Elvira said. "Would you like to see them?"

"I would," the stranger said. "Very much."

"Chuck, this here is my wife, Loretta."

"Hi," Loretta said, nearly spilling her drink.

"How do you do, Loretta," the stranger said. "And what a gorgeous bracelet, if I may say so."

"Diamonds and opals," Loretta said.

"It is good, isn't it," Loretta's husband said. "I can tell you have an eye for good jewels. Of course you would, wouldn't you?"

"I try," the stranger said. Delicately he lifted Loretta's arm and looked at the bracelet more closely. "Yes," he said with genuine approval.

"I'm Ben Hanna," Loretta's husband said. "I'm a trained lawyer, but I inherited a jewelry business from my old man and I run that too. It means Loretta gets to wear some real good stuff, and I can write off the insurance because she's advertising it."

"So you might have some pieces that would be suitable for gifts?" the stranger said.

"I sure do. Hell, you've seen this little wrist full of sparklers. Hold it up again, honey."

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Loretta Hanna raised her arm unsteadily. At the same time she said, "I think they ought to do laboratory experiments on lawyers instead of rats, don't you? For one thing there's more of them, and for another you can get attached to a laboratory rat."

"Shut up, Loretta."

"Well, excuse my butt, Mister Smooth Talker."

"No more to drink. Understand me."

"Well I *no habla Engles* anymore all of a sudden."

"Excuse me, Chuck," Ben Hanna said. "You come down to the store, see if something grabs you where you can't say no. Anybody can tell you how to get there. Maybe catch you again later, after I sort out this little problem."

Mrs. Dexter put her arm around the stranger's waist and said, "Hey, tell me the truth, will you, Chuck?"

"What about, Mrs. Dexter?"

"About Margaret. I always thought she was the cutest little thing, but then she got a real raw deal over that captain. And now I hear she's a lush. Is that the truth? 'Cause that would be so sad."

"I'd really rather not talk about that kind of thing, if you don't mind."

"Oh, they told me not to. But c'mon, tell *me* anyhow." She winked. "If you do, I'll have you to dinner. I know all the recipes. You'll go away satisfied. I've never had a complaint yet."

The stranger extricated himself from Mrs. Dexter's grasp. He said, "Please don't press me."

Mrs. Dexter drew back. "Well, excuse *me!* I guess after all those years with a goddamned peroxide alfalfa salad, you're just not up to a *real* meal."

"Margaret is *not* a lush," the stranger said stiffly. "In fact, she has one of the finest minds you would ever care to encounter. Now, please excuse me."

Near the end of the evening the stranger found Glen and Edie watching the Hoechstadtler's television. Edie looked up and said, "About ready to go?"

"Yes, thank you," the stranger said.

"Have you had a good time?"

"Very nice indeed," the stranger said. "Your friends are fascinating people."

"I'd have called them just plain folks," Glen said.

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"And they are extremely hospitable. Two even invited me to stay in their homes as their guests. People here are most marvellously friendly."

Edie's face wrinkled up. "Does that mean you're moving out of the Sunrest?"

"No, Edie, I'm not. I always feel that I'm not my own man when I'm staying in a house as a guest. Do you know what I mean?"

"I sure do, Chuck," Edie said. "And let me just say, Glen and me are honored to have you in our little motel."

"You've made me feel very comfortable, and very welcome. And I continue to count on your discretion and cooperation."

The next few days were very busy ones for the stranger, and increasingly Edie acted as social secretary, taking messages and keeping track of when the stranger was available for lunch or dinner, for this excursion or that.

The stranger went out several times with Lenny Kahlenbeck to look at substantial homes in various parts of Dubois and adjoining counties. Isolation, as they discussed at length, would be essential because of the need for privacy. Kahlenbeck offered to help with a high-tech security system too, through a cousin.

The area the stranger found most attractive was near Patoka Lake in the Lick Fork State Recreation Area. But there were tempting houses too in Celestine, Riceville, Bacon, and in the ironically named English and Ireland.

By the third afternoon, however, it was clear that the stranger could not be easily satisfied and would not make a hasty purchase.

"But don't get me wrong," Kahlenbeck said. "I respect a careful man, I truly do."

"It *is* beautiful country," the stranger said. "And I certainly appreciate your generosity with your time. I particularly like the modern log cabins. Do you have any more on your files?"

"You've seen everything," Kahlenbeck said.

"But if something else comes up, you wouldn't mind my coming back for a look?"

"I sure wouldn't," Kahlenbeck said.

"Good."

"Chuck?"

"Yes?"

"I wondered if I could ask you a little favour?"

"What's that?" the stranger said.

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"I don't begrudge a minute of it, but I've put in a lot of time with you the last few days."

"And I am very grateful, truly."

"What I was wondering was, would you mind if my little secretary, if she took a picture of the two of us together."

"Oh, I don't know about that," the stranger said.

"It would be just for me, maybe to hang on the wall behind my desk. I know how you want to make sure it wouldn't get in newspapers or anything."

"Even so," the stranger said. "It's a matter of . . . well, how things are done. What we call protocol."

"Don't you ever have your picture taken with people you meet?"

"Oh, sometimes. For instance, when I'm at a charity function."

"Charity?" Lenny Kahlenbeck's eyes narrowed.

"If, say, a local philanthropist were to make a large charitable donation to one of the causes I espouse. Alternative medicine, for instance, or population control. Well, it would be churlish in such circumstances for me to object to a photograph being taken with the benefactor."

"A donation, huh?" Kahlenbeck said.

"Yes," the stranger said.

"Like, how big a donation is 'large'?"

Having had considerable opportunity to assess the best answer to such a question, the stranger said, "Like, two thousand dollars."

"I see," Kahlenbeck said.

"So you understand," the stranger said affably, "it's probably best all around to forget the picture, because even if you wanted it I'd need the money in cash."

"Cash?"

"Well think about it. Suppose I took a check. The charity could see immediately where I'd been. And then there would be no chance of my ever being able to buy a secret vacation home here, would there?"

"No," Kahlenbeck said. He considered. "I spose not."

"With no receipt, you wouldn't be able to deduct it as a charitable donation," the stranger said. "But since you'd have the photograph you *could* deduct it as advertising. Especially if it were taken, the two of us together, in front of your real-estate office, showing the name in the background."

The photograph was taken the next day.

* * *

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The price to Ben Hanna, the lawyer-jeweler, was five thousand. If the stranger had worried that Hanna's legal training would make him balk at dealing in cash, he needn't have. Hanna agreed immediately, making the stranger wonder if, perhaps, he had pitched the level of the charitable contribution too low.

Elvira Klingerman made her charitable donations in an altogether different manner and the stranger agreed to appear in several photographs with her, all Polaroids. The best were taken in the stables.

Although the stranger declined to dine with Mrs. Dexter, he twice ate with Connie, her three teenaged sons, and her trucker husband. Connie was "just" a housewife, but she was a marvellous cook.

In the late afternoon of his fifth day in Jesper, Edie appeared at the door of the stranger's room at the Sunrest with a boy of about five.

"Hello, Edie," the stranger said. "And who is this?"

"This here is Georgie," Edie said. "Georgie's my grandson."

"Is he really a prince, Gramma?" Georgie said to Edie. "Are you really a prince?" Georgie asked the stranger.

The stranger kneeled so that he could speak face-to-face with his chubby, energetic little visitor. "Am I really a prince?" The stranger winked up at Edie. "No, Georgie, I'm not a prince. Not today."

"My mommy says you're a prince."

"That's very nice of her," the stranger said. "But I'd say that *you* were Mommy's prince, wouldn't you?"

"What do you have to do to be a *real* prince?" Georgie asked.

"Well, gee," the stranger said, "I don't know. I guess you've got to try real hard. Are you going to do that? Are you going to try real hard and see if you can be a prince too?"

"Okay," Georgie said, and then a horn sounded behind him and his grandmother.

"There's Daddy," Edie said.

The stranger shook Georgie's hand, but the boy pulled away and ran to his father's car. Both Edie and the stranger waved until the vehicle pulled out onto the street.

Then Edie stepped away and faced the stranger. She said, "I know."

"Excuse me, Edie?"

"I said that I *know*."

"What do you know?"

"I know what you've been doing."

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The stranger said nothing.

"I have trouble sleeping sometimes," Edie said. "I leave Glen where he's laying and I watch the all-night news. Last night they had some news from England, about them sad divorces. They showed the Queen of England and all her kids, and the program was about how hard it is on all of them, being royal."

The stranger was ready with a speech about the use of doubles, look-alikes, hired to enable members of the Royal Family to get time to relax away from home, away from the paparazzi.

But Edie said, "You never claimed to be him, did you? Not in so many words."

"No, I didn't," the stranger said.

"I've been thinking about it all day long. Glen even asked me what's the matter, but he knows I'm funny sometimes when I don't sleep, so he stopped asking."

The stranger considered saying he was sorry.

Edie said, "Thinking about it, I can't see as there's a lot of harm you've done. A lot of folks have had a good time because you were around, though I expect there's some that's paid for it. No more than they could afford, I shouldn't wonder."

The stranger said, "Thank you, Edie. You're a generous-hearted woman."

"Oh no I'm not," she said. "And I'm also not the only one in town that can't sleep sometimes."

"What do you want me to do?"

"I want you to pack your bags."

"All right."

"And then I want you to go down to the office. I want you to shake Glen's hand, and I want you to pay your room bill. You got enough money to do that?"

"Yes."

"You pay that bill in full, because it would about destroy Glen if he gave you credit and you didn't pay."

"I'll pay the bill in full," the stranger said.

"And then you get the hell out of Jesper," Edie said.

"Is there a bus? Or a train?"

"I don't know, and I don't care. But I want you out of this town before the sun goes down, and I don't want you to stop moving till you're a hundred miles away. And don't you never come back. Most folks, when they're leaving, I say to them, 'Don't be a stranger now.'

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But you *be* a stranger, mister, or I'll have your hide, Glen or no Glen."

"I'll be on my way inside the hour," the stranger said. ●

DETECTIVERSE

GHOST TOWN

by CATHERINE STEELE

Mary, Mary, quite contrary
plied her friends with cakes and sherry.

Shared their secrets, and their sins. . . .
knew who was father of the twins.

Gloated at each broken union,
watched to see who took communion.

Catalogued who took what pills,
and knew her friends' most private ills.

Mary had a poison pen,
wrote a letter now and then.

The town was small. . . .
crushed friends moved out . . .
till there were none to talk about.

So when she tumbled down the well,
no one was there to hear her yell.

Poor Mary!

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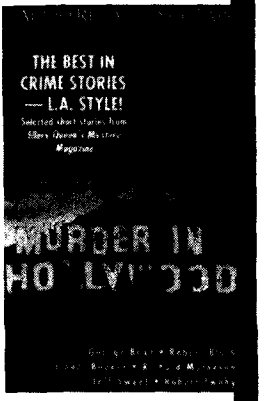

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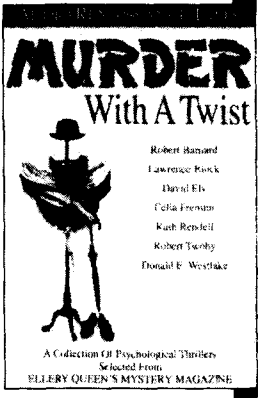

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a *NEW* short story by

DONALD OLSON

Donald Olson held a variety of jobs, from railroad worker to newspaper reporter to bookstore owner, before settling down to write full-time in a small town in the hills of western New York. Although he believes that there is no place more conducive to his sort of work than his adopted village of Jamestown, the author loves to travel and he knows the setting of this story well from his days at New York University. . . .

STOLEN GOODS

by DONALD OLSON

In Bloomingdale's that afternoon, fumbling for her charge card, Hope drops her handbag on the floor, scattering its contents. She feels her friend's eyes on her and later, over lunch at the Russian Tea Room, is not surprised when Alice asks: "You feeling okay, honey? You seem a bit on edge. Like the other night at the Simpsons'. I noticed you weren't really *there*."

Hope decides it is safe to confide in Alice. Who else is there? "It's so bizarre. Senseless. Paul's been getting these letters at his office. Love letters. From me."

Alice grins. "Cute. Most of us do that sort of thing *before* we're married."

"Not cute. Creepy. They're not to him."

"Come again."

"I wrote them, yes. They're from me, but I wrote them to another guy. Don't look at me like that. I'm talking years ago. My dear, I'd forgotten all about them. It all happened in another life, ages before I met Paul."

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Alice is plainly enthralled. "Now let me get this straight. You wrote some guy love letters years ago and now these same letters have been popping up in Paul's office, addressed to him."

Hope nods. "You can see where he'd get the wrong idea. They're all headed 'Darling' or 'My darling' or other endearments. Never the guy's name."

"What about the envelopes?"

"In my handwriting. I mean it *looks* like mine. It would fool me."

Alice sips her tea. "So what does Paul make out of it?"

"I haven't told him. I've tried, but I can't."

"Why not, for Pete's sake?"

"I don't know. Alice, he's so pleased about them. Like a kid. Ever since he started getting them he's been acting like a—well, I've never had any serious complaints in that department but lately he's been—shall we say supercharged?"

"That's a problem? Okay, not funny, but where's the harm? They can't keep coming forever. How long did you write to this guy?"

Hope shrugs, elegantly, as she does everything. "This was ten years ago. I wrote him, I don't know, maybe seven or eight letters over a two or three month span. Not ordinary letters. Not newsy, nothing to date them. Just gushy, sentimental outpourings of the heart. I was young and madly in love. They were lyrical. They were—"

"Sexy? That the word you're looking for? Now Paul is getting all turned on, thinking you're writing these steamy billets-doux to him. Intriguing."

"When Paul mentioned the first one I played dumb," Hope says. "Well, I *was* dumb. Dumbfounded, I mean, when he showed me the letters. He thought I was being coy telling him I didn't know what he was talking about. I just looked at it; I didn't know what to say. I know, I should have told him right then but, as I say, he was so tickled. Now . . . "

Alice is clearly amused by the whole thing, sees nothing sinister in it, nothing to get alarmed about. "Okay, assuming it's the man you wrote them to who's sending them to Paul, what's his game? I mean if it's not just his idea of a joke."

"It's certainly not mine. And I don't see how he could possibly *be* sending them. They're postmarked in New York and he's—well, he's not even in town."

"You sure? What's his name?"

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"Locke. Denny Locke." Hope hesitates, then spills the rest. "He's in prison. Attica."

"Oh God."

Hope explains how she'd met Denny Locke while she was still married to her first husband. Philip had been one of her patients when she was in private nursing. He was a semi-invalid, considerably older than Hope. She'd known almost at once that the marriage had been a mistake, but her life had been at a dead-end, she was lonely, and she'd felt sorry for Philip.

"We were still married when I met Denny. He was young and brash and exciting. Well, eventually Philip died and shortly after that Denny was sent up. Alice, I swear I didn't know Denny was a crook. I was blindly infatuated. If you read those letters you'd think I hadn't known there was more to life than just sex."

With her usual air of cheerful cynicism Alice says: "Honey, there's more to sex than just sex." Then, levity abandoned, she grows thoughtful. "Okay, so Paul knows he didn't marry a nun—"

"He knows about Philip. Not about Denny."

"So tell him."

Hope shakes her head. "He'd be terribly hurt—I mean about the letters." That those letters have produced an effect upon their relationship rather like an infusion of fresh blood into anemic tissue Hope doubts her friend would altogether understand. The marriage had been by no means rocky but there was also no denying a pebbly stretch had weakened the element of togetherness which at first had been the most important factor in their lives. From a modest beginning in the financial world Paul had attained a position that had created a certain strain on their domestic life.

"Then *don't* tell him," says Alice. "Let them run their course and then forget about them."

Hope glares at her. "Are you serious? Without knowing why they were sent? Or by whom? How can I be sure Denny's doing it? I can't imagine him keeping them all these years. And if he's up in Attica and they're being mailed in New York . . ."

"Look, sweetie, it would have to be someone who knows all about you and Paul. My best advice is to tell him and stop worrying."

So easy to say. "I will, yes," Hope promises. "But first you've got to do me a favor. That cop or detective or whatever he is. Dickie, was that his name? You're still friends, aren't you?"

"So far as ex-lovers *can* be friends."

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"Please, Alice, will you ask him to find out about Denny? If he's still in prison? I wouldn't know how to do that. You can say you're asking for a friend or something."

Alice regards her with a resigned smile. "I suppose I could do that. If it'll set your mind at rest."

"It would help. I feel better already just having talked to someone about it."

"Talk to Paul. You'll feel even better. And, honey, next time you write love letters use names, and date them."

White carnations, Hope's favorite flowers, delivered by a florist with a card from Paul, a gesture he hasn't made in years. Hope could cry, sitting there in her elegant living room with its ivory walls set off by jade and cinnamon fabrics chosen to complement Paul's collection of Chinese porcelain and his wife's still-arresting beauty. She arranges the flowers in an Imari vase by the window overlooking the park, gazes unseeingly at the view, then wanders into the bedroom and picks up the letter where Paul has left it.

Last night, my dearest, taught me the meaning of the word ecstasy. This morning I tremble in fear of losing you. Let me die before that happens.

The words recall to Hope's mind the face of the man to whom she wrote them, that brutally handsome face with its smoldering eyes and sensuous smile. His ruggedly virile charms had eased for those precious stolen hours the depressing effect upon her spirits Philip's debilitating illness and perpetual crankiness had produced. How different her life might have been if Denny hadn't been arrested for armed robbery and receiving stolen goods.

And hadn't she been guilty, she'd told herself, of the same offense? Hadn't she been a receiver of stolen goods? Wasn't that what infidelity amounted to?

Poisoned by guilt, her passion had died as swiftly as it had been aroused; she'd burned Denny's letters from prison without even reading them.

Paul seems in a reflective mood that night as they go to bed. Taking Hope in his arms, he says: "My dear, I know for a while there how it was, but the lines of communication are open again now, don't you agree? I don't need any more letters to make me realize how neglectful I'd become."

Hope has never found the bed less comfortable. "It wasn't all your fault," she whispers.

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"Were you really afraid I might leave you?"

"No, of course not."

"I got that impression from today's letter. What was it you wrote? 'I can't bear the thought of losing you. I'd take any risk, I'd even kill, if I thought that might happen.' " He laughs softly. "Pretty strong words."

Hope feels suddenly frightened, too confused to know what to say. It was ten years ago, she can't be absolutely certain, yet she can almost swear she's never written those particular words.

Hope calls Alice next morning and makes a date for lunch at the Four Seasons.

"The guy must be wacko," says Alice. "Prison must have sent him around the bend. He is out, by the way."

"Oh no!"

"Dickie couldn't tell me where he is, just that he served his time and was released two months ago. But why should he *forge* this latest letter? He must be good if it fooled Paul."

"Alice, it fooled *me*. If I didn't know better I'd swear *I'd* written it." She recalls the feeling of stunned disbelief when she'd taken the letter from Paul's dresser and read the whole thing.

"That's when you should have come clean," says Alice. "Why in heaven's name didn't you tell him the truth?"

"I tried. I really did, but then I lost my nerve."

"Honey, if this bastard has run out of real letters and started to forge them, who knows how long it might go on."

"I know, I know. I must tell Paul. Now that I know Denny's out and is right here in New York."

"Believe me, Hope, Paul will understand. He loves you. Tell him tonight."

Again, it is a promise Hope is unable to keep: that same afternoon Denny Locke calls her.

His voice hasn't changed; Hope knows at once who it is. "You haven't forgotten me, have you, babe?"

Babe. She winces. Could she ever have been the sort of woman one calls babe? Anger flares. She wastes no time on small talk. "You louse, Denny. Why have you been sending those silly letters to my husband?"

"Stirred things up, did they?" He sounds gleeful.

"He thinks I've been writing them to *him*."

"So what did he say when you told him the truth?"

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"I haven't told him. Not yet. I knew you had a rotten streak, Denny, but why should you want to make trouble for *me?*"

"Oh, babe, that's the last thing I want to do. You think I've forgotten how it was with us? When can we meet?"

Hope catches her breath. "Are you *nuts?* I've no intention or desire ever to see you again. And if you try—"

"Hey, relax. I'm not suggesting we relight the fire. This is business. Serious business. You and me, babe, we have ourselves a little chat and then you can forget all about me again. That's a promise."

"No way will I—"

"Oh, but you will. Because if you don't, I really will make trouble for you. Bad trouble. So let's not waste time sniping at each other."

He gives her the name of a West Side hotel and orders her to meet him there, in room 302, the following afternoon.

Her first mistake, Hope knows, has been to withhold from Paul the truth about those letters. She doesn't want to make another mistake. Her options are clear: head straight for Paul's office and make a clean breast of it; or go herself to the police, accuse Denny of harassing, even threatening her; or keep the appointment with Locke. Her better judgment urges her to go at once to Paul. But what if Denny is not bluffing? She might pretend to herself that she cannot imagine what sort of trouble Denny could make for her, yet she cannot dismiss as pure fantasy, as she tried to do last night, the sense of vague foreboding left in her mind by certain phrases in that last letter, the letter she had *not* written.

In the end, even while telling herself she might be making a fatal mistake, Hope decides to keep the appointment.

The cab drops her a block from the hotel, one of those nondescript West Side hotels of the sort in which she had secretly met Denny all those years ago. Hope remembers with distaste the violent excitement of the senses she'd felt upon entering that other hotel, the ravening hunger of desire. Now she feels no shadow of that old excitement, only the weight of an old guilt.

She pauses outside room 302, questioning once more the wisdom of what she is doing. There is still time to retreat, still time to grab a taxi and go straight to Paul's office.

She lifts her hand and knocks.

Aside from a certain coarseness and pallor, he hasn't changed remarkably, although Hope is quick to note the air of seediness, the unfamiliar wariness behind the smile.

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"My God, babe, you're even more of a looker than you were ten years ago," he greets her.

Hope steps quickly inside and shuts the door, pulls off her dark glasses, and regards Denny Locke with sour contempt.

"Don't waste my time with flattery, Denny."

He shrugs his heavy shoulders, waves her to a chair. "Drink? For old times' sake?"

Hope shakes her head as he reaches for the bottle. "Just tell me *why,* Denny. Is it because I never answered your letters? Are you trying to punish me for that?"

"Good Lord, is that what you thought?" The idea clearly amuses him. He lights a cigarette and sits down on the bed. "I could hardly expect us to be pen pals after you found out what I did for a living. I was hurt, sure. What guy wouldn't be, but hell, I didn't blame you."

"Then *why?"*

"Simple. I need money."

Hope stares at him without surprise, almost with relief. "I see. You need money. And I'm supposed to provide it? Prison *has* softened your brain."

Locke rises, pours himself a drink, and stands looking down at her. "Lots of guys study in prison, babe. Law, accounting, woodworking, you name it. Me, I had a cellmate, an old pro, who taught me his art. He really was an artist. A master forger. The very best. It took years, but now I'm as good as he was. He said so himself. Whatever you may have read, there is such a thing as a foolproof forgery. The last letter I sent your old man is a prime example. It oughta be framed."

He makes a move as if to touch her hair, laughs as Hope recoils and springs to her feet. "Babe, I'm glad you let him believe those letters were to him. It wouldn't have mattered either way, but now you're going to look even guiltier when he gets the next letter. *If* he gets it, which is up to you."

"I'm guilty of nothing," Hope cries. "Except what I did to Philip."

"And what exactly did you do to old Philip?"

"You know very well. I cheated on him. I was unfaithful. That's history. It has nothing to do with Paul and me."

Locke crosses to the chest of drawers, picks up a sheet of paper, and hands it to her. "This will be the last letter, Hope. You see I even managed to get the same kind of paper you used. Read it."

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Hope takes it and turns away to hide the apprehension on her face.

My dearest,

You said it was madness even to think about it, but I can't go on like this. If there's any risk—and I know there isn't—I'm prepared to take it. I'm a trained nurse. I know about these things. Philip would die soon anyway; it will be an act of mercy. It'll be so easy, my darling. There'll be no trace, and it's in his will that he wants to be cremated. I'll be doing it for you, for us. I know I shouldn't put all this in a letter. It's my only way to prove how much I love and trust you. If you truly love me, burn it. If you don't trust my love, if you have any fears I'll ever leave you, then keep it. Punish me with it if I ever betray your love. I never shall. My love, I'm not going to see you again until it's done. Soon, my dearest, soon.

Your ever faithful adoring Hope.

As if knowing what effect the letter will produce, Locke thrusts a glass into her hand and removes the paper from her shaking fingers.

"I'm sorry, babe, I really am."

Perhaps more terrifying than the letter's contents is the distinctive handwriting, seemingly her own, convincingly her own, each flourish of the pen unmistakably characteristic.

"You can't do this, Denny. You wouldn't."

"You can swear it's a forgery, Hope, but will *he* believe you? He knows you were a nurse. He knows your first husband was an invalid, and when you're forced to tell him about me . . . Face it, babe, will he ever again believe you about anything? Will he ever be sure he can trust you?"

Mindlessly, Hope touches the glass to her lips; the bitter taste of the whiskey fails to warm her. "What is it you want from me?"

"Money. You can get it. I'm only asking for twenty grand. Just to get me on my feet again. To get me out of this town and make a fresh start."

"I can't," she says, and then, even more weakly, "I won't."

"So be it. The choice is yours. Tell your old man about me. Try explaining why you let him believe you were writing those letters to him. Try making him and the cops believe the last two letters were forgeries. You're willing to take that gamble, fine. I'm out of here as soon as you leave. I'll call you in a couple of days. Think about it, babe."

* * *

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Locke picks her up three days later at the corner of Lexington and Forty-sixth Street. They scarcely speak until they are in a parking lot behind a Chinese restaurant.

"So where are they?" he asks.

"Here. In my bag."

He takes the handbag from her lap, snaps it open, removes the bundle of documents, and examines them carefully, one by one. "I still think you could have got the cash," he grumbles.

"I told you on the phone. Paul doesn't keep cash in the house. These blue-chip bonds are just as good. They're worth much more than twenty thousand."

"Maybe in face value. I'll be lucky to get half that from the people who take them off my hands."

"Paul always said they'd be our cushion, in case of another market collapse."

Locke shoves the bonds into his briefcase, returns the handbag to Hope's lap, pats her knee. "You were always a cool one, babe. Up there in the pen I used to wonder if maybe you really did knock off old Philip."

Her gaze is anything but cool. "You know better than that."

"This fake burglary. I hope you made it look good."

"Don't worry. I was very careful. I'll be home in an hour—to discover the break-in. I'll call the police, and then Paul."

Again his hand caresses her knee. "If it's any satisfaction, babe, I really am sorry I had to put you through this. There just wasn't any other way."

"Haven't you forgotten something?"

With a grin he draws the forged letter from his pocket and tucks it into her bag.

A month later, insisting Hope really must get out of the house, Alice invites her to lunch at an expensive restaurant. Hope does look as if she needs cheering up, but all of her friend's efforts seem in vain.

"For a burglar," says Alice, "your friend Denny wasn't very smart. I thought they all wore gloves."

"He obviously did. They didn't find his prints anywhere but on my bag. I suppose he took them off when he rifled it."

It had been her only mistake, it never having occurred to Hope that the police would dust her bag for prints. They had quickly identified ex-con Denny Locke as the burglar.

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"And they never caught up with him until he tried to fence the bonds," says Alice. "Pity they didn't just return them. Sometimes the police can be surprisingly thorough."

"I suppose I should be grateful Denny didn't give *me* away."

"Poor Hope." Alice's sympathy is tinged with cynicism. "You were never lucky in picking men. Philip was too old and sick. Both Denny and Paul were—"

"Please, let's not talk about Paul."

"Well, you know now why he never wanted to talk about his past. The papers certainly had a field day with that one. Enterprising young clerk steals a bundle of bonds from a Chicago brokerage house and disappears. Changes his name, comes to New York, and makes a big splash on Wall Street. How long do the medics think he'll have to stay in the rest home?"

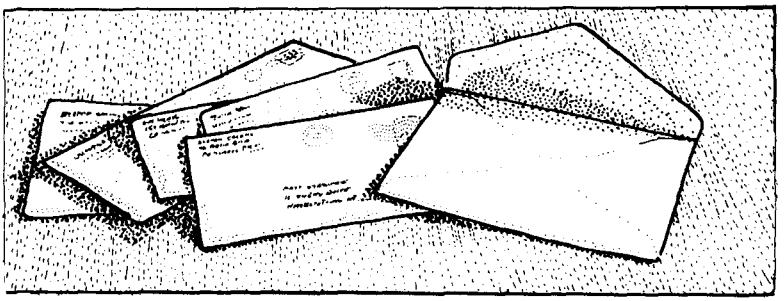
"It's impossible to say. It was a complete breakdown. We're ruined, of course. It took every cent we had to cover Paul's bail and the lawyer's retainer. All we really have left is Paul's life insurance."

Alice reaches out to pat her friend's hand. "You're an angel to stand by him."

"Of course I'll stand by him. I'm his wife. *And* a trained nurse. Don't forget that."

"My dear, you haven't done any nursing in years."

A strangely distant smile passes briefly across Hope's drawn but still-elegant features. "You're right, I haven't. Not since Philip."



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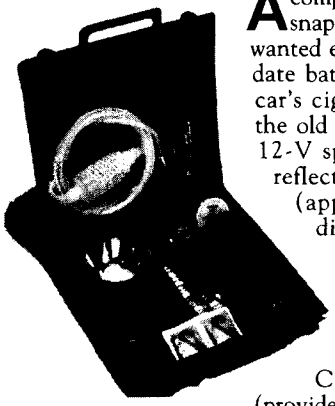

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a *NEW* short story by

FLORENCE V. MAYBERRY

Florence Mayberry describes herself as a "restless type" who has traveled to every state in the Union bar one. Here she takes us on an excursion not only in space but in time, to the Nevada of the prohibition years. . . .

SMILING JOE AND THE TWINS

by FLORENCE V. MAYBERRY

1.

It is doubtful that any two people were more unlike than the Galway twins, Geraldine and Patricia. Their mother, an extremely pretty, very feminine blond lady, named them. That occurred in the early morning at the hospital as the babies nuzzled at her breast. That evening their names were shortened on the hospital records to Jerry and Pat by bellowing demand of their father. Mr. Dion Galway had had his heart set on fine big Irish sons. But other than getting a divorce and finding a new wife, which twenty years' residence in Reno, Nevada, had soured him on, plus his strong attachment to the wife he had, it seemed that boyish nicknames were as close as he could reach to that goal. For unfortunately the birth of the twins had turned into a touch-and-go crisis and the doctors announced that these two husky little females had ended childbearing in this Galway family.

It soon became evident that Jerry was a true match-up for a boy designation. One afternoon when she was no more than two and a half, the Galway ranch hands were alerted by hysterics from the normally calm Indian nursemaid as she raced through the stables screeching that Jerry was not only lost but likely trampled by Dion's high-strung racehorses. A mass search spread out until one of the men looked into the Shetland pony's stall and found Jerry tippytoed

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on a box, yanking on the pony's mane, determined to go horsie-back. When the rescuer tried to pick her off, she loosed a banshee yell, kicked, and bit, demanding to be put aboard.

Her command obeyed, her pudgy hands grabbed the pony's mane and to the admiring amazement of all, except her mother, nursemaid, and sister Pat, the latter quietly dressing dollies in the nursery, Jerry proudly trotted her steed up to the front veranda of the sprawling ranch house.

In strong contrast to the stocky, black-eyed, red-haired Jerry, Pat continued to grow up into a replica of her mother, graceful, slender, blond, and very feminine. Also terrified of horses. Even at the advanced age of six she had to be dragged by her father to the stables and boosted and strapped into the saddle of the fat lazy Shetland long forsaken by the bronc-riding Jerry, then led weeping around the corral, while Jerry, astride a quarter horse or one of her father's Arabs, raced around the cow pasture intent on lassoing some indignant bovine.

"Run that heifer down, baby!" Jerry's adoring father might be yelling. "Not a boy in Washoe County can match you! Keep it up, you'll be running this place by the time you're ten." And if the ranch foreman was nearby Dion might say, "Wouldn't you think being twins with that little redheaded spitfire, Pat might show some of that spunk. I tell you, the way that Jerry even sasses me around she'll not only run the ranch, by twenty-one she'll be pushing to take over some of my clubs around Nevada."

Dion Galway's antecedents had a way of being black-haired and black-eyed, or fiery redheads and black-eyed, scarce a blue eye or blond among them. The males were grudge-bearing, fist-flying roisterers back in Ireland who eventually fought their way onto an emigrant boat for America and kept up the good fight after they landed. In various profitable ways, and hanging together as a family, they bunched up a sizeable Galway fortune. Dion's particular generation had produced him as the lone male among eight vivid and demanding females, his sisters and cousins, which strongly motivated his desire for a son. The family inheritance had therefore been cut nine ways. A very comfortable legacy for each, but to the expansive Dion merely piddling. Consequently, in his early twenties he ventured west and joyfully discovered that Nevada and Reno in the early nineteen-twenties offered fascinating possibilities of turning his inheritance into a great deal of money. Discovered love,

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too, with a calm Nordic beauty devoted to cooking, keeping house, and loving her husband.

During Dion's second year in Reno he caught the eye of the Old Man, who was often referred to on Commercial Row and the Lake and Center streets gambling habitats as the King of Nevada, said title arising from the fact that the Old Man owned controlling interest in Nevada's more successful gambling clubs. In those days this did not include Las Vegas, since that little sun-roasted town was barely on the map as far as the sophisticates of the Biggest Little City in the World were concerned. Tomorrow maybe, but take care of that when tomorrow shows up.

The Old Man and the engaging young Irisher took to each other right off, became mutual admirers as well as stockholders. By the time the twins came along Dion was occasionally referred to as the "crown prince." As years passed, so did the references increase. It was a profitable association, income arising largely from the legal gambling clubs, plus "et cetera" covering a shadowy field of enterprise. Their business soared along with prohibition and the world's rising divorce rate. In keeping with this, Dion acquired a fine big ranch in the mountain-bordered, green-pastured Washoe Valley, which spread between Reno and Carson City. Dion soon crowned the ranch with a luxurious two-story house where Inga, his blond, blue-eyed wife, contentedly threw parties for Reno's upper-crust plus numerous newsworthy wealthy ladies temporarily resident in Reno while awaiting freedom from tiresome husbands.

Smiling Joe Clancy also hit Reno in the nineteen-twenties. Somewhat younger than Dion Galway, Smiling Joe was only twenty-six, but very advanced in the world's ways, as the former had been upon his own arrival in the Biggest Little City. Back in those twenties the "Mob," whether stemming from Chicago, New York, Kansas City, wherever or whatever, hadn't yet eased into town to grab off juicy chunks of Nevada. The Nevada crooks were home folks, family folks, steady churchgoers, with unpretentious homes, first up for charity donations. Leaders of this home-grown sovereignty amounted to a modest handful, topped by the "king," and maybe a crown prince. Their moral standards leaned heavily toward old-fashioned conservative, with a downright fetish about protecting their womenfolk, with heavy emphasis on "their." It was a matter of public boasting that all Reno's businessmen of any stature were making "damn sure" Reno's women would be safe on any street, day or night. Fooling around by randy local males was strictly limited

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to the Line, a string of cabins tucked into a hollow at the outskirts of town, said cabins rented out to strictly professional ladies. Considerable guessing went on among Reno's less informed population segments as to who, singular or plural, owned the Line and pocketed a big slice of its income. No guessing took place as to whether or not it was lucrative. It was.

Prohibition fostered those past happy days in Reno. The big depression of 1929 seemed to scoot right past the Biggest Little City; the Old Man and Dion, plus the lucky handful of public-spirited citizens, felt real special about their town and its good business. Hence, so far, no mob.

When Smiling Joe hit town Reno was in great condition, ripe for the taking for anyone who could slip in. Joe's smile kept getting wider and wider.

Now what about those two little Nevada princesses, the Galway twins?

Steadily growing up. Jerry was winning prizes for riding and jumping, plus breeding and bartering her own string of mounts, plus begging her dad to let her have a go at broncobusting. Made Dion about the proudest man in Nevada. Eased his disappointment in her sister Pat, who spent most of her time in tippytoe ballet classes, blond hair piled high in ribbons, saucy tutus bouncing over ruffled pants.

"Lemme tell you, Mr. Galway, your Jerry sits those big Arabians like she and the horse came into the world thataway, all of a piece," the ranch foreman reported.

"Yessiree, got me a boy all right," Dion boasted. "Anything ever happens to me, that kid's already got the guts to take over everything I got."

Truth is, that took a weight off Dion, since lately there were times when he grew anxious that he actually might not live forever. It took hard-core struggle to stay crown prince with money-hungry applicants nibbling at that shadowy title. Then too, the king was getting up in years and the uncertainty of age was making him tricky and very, very shrewd. He got a kick out of playing one contender against another, back and forth, like with the king's sudden, all-out friendship with that big, chuckling, grinning Joe. Where the hell did that guy come from anyway? And now the Old Man was confiding in Dion that it was downright wonderful the way that happy guy Joe could lift an old man's spirits, make him feel young again.

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The twins were about twelve when Joe surfaced in Reno.

Joe was kind of a mystery to everybody. Hailed from somewhere in the Midwest, sidestepped giving out precisely where. At the start, who cared? Guys from somewhere or nowhere were always stopping off at Reno, leaving the same way. Soon gone. But Joe; Joe stayed.

During his first few days in Reno, Joe wandered in and out of the various gambling clubs. Then he began to show up regularly in the largest of the Old Man's establishments, in which Dion also held heavy financial interest. Just kind of routine visits. Then one night became special. Joe shot a wad, lost himself a real bundle, but never blinked an eye. He grinned, reached in his pocket, pulled out hundred-dollar bills like they were pennies, and put down five of them. It was noted that this pocket was on the inside of his coat and had a button on it.

Well, it turned out that this crazy galoot, carrying all that cash around, won five thousand that night. All on the up and up, for sure. Sharp-eyed, suspicious floor managers testified to that. Joe didn't act proud, or cocky, or anything, just widened his smile into a big bashful grin, bought drinks for the table, eased off into the night. "Be back," he promised cheerily.

He was. Not the next night, he saved it up for later. Instead he went to the neighboring club, which happened to be under the same management. Lost five hundred. Shook his head like an embarrassed kid. "Try, try again," he said, then lost a couple times more. Shook his head again, his grin kind of twisted and goofy, put another bill on the table. And blamed if he didn't end up with four, maybe it was six, thousand to the good. He took it real low-key, pleased but quiet, kind of like a kid getting an unexpected present at a Sunday school program.

Joe didn't push it too far, just showed up now and then, spread himself around different clubs. Once in a while he lost, and took that like a man. He took his winnings the same way, which, if anyone bothered to keep track, considerably overbalanced the losses.

The management of the clubs bothered.

Dion himself carried word of the new arrival to the Old Man, who wisely suggested that a few telegrams be sent off asking questions. Like to Chicago, New York, Kansas City, New Orleans, Detroit, since the stranger was reputed to be from the Midwest or back East.

None of the sources had heard of a Joe Clancy.

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"Could be a name change took place," Dion suggested to the Old Man. So more telegrams were sent, this time with a description: SIX FEET TWO OVER TWO HUNDRED POUNDS BROWN WAVY HAIR BLUE EYES MAYBE 25 TO 30 YEARS SMILES A LOT.

The "smiles a lot" pinned Joe. Back came a telegram from Kansas City: COULD BE SMILING JOE FORSHEY NOT CLANCY RAN TULSA CABARET SHOT MAN CHEATING POKER CHARGES DROPPED GUY LIVED BESIDES X CON BUT BUDDIES HOLD GRUDGE JOE HARD BUT STRAIGHT KEEPS WORD.

The Old Man took a fancy to this character reference and had Dion bring Joe up to the palace on the hill overlooking the Truckee River for a little royal hospitality. Joe gave a wide grin, said it made him real proud to accept.

2.

The Old Man's fancy for Joe increased at that first meeting. He told Dion afterwards he hadn't laughed that much in years, said Joe's down-home humor and way of looking at things relaxed him. He'd slept that night straight through, first time in ages.

At the time, this admiring comment slipped right past Dion on account of he'd laughed a lot too. It was only later, after five or six similar comments, that he started thinking about it.

Joe started out as kind of a flunky, translate that bodyguard, driving the Old Man all over Nevada to inspect his multiple investments, some of them in areas where the king was not real popular. But all that riding around can be pretty hard on an old man, and in a couple of years it was Joe showing up to check the clubs and bars while his boss stayed home. Dion also stayed home, in a fine new administrative office above the main club. "I knew you wouldn't want to be doing all that driving around, being away from your family," the Old Man had pointed out to Dion. "Besides, I need you to keep the store here in Reno. Those back-East mobs are itching to take over Nevada and they'll hit Reno first. Joe can watch the outskirts. If they try to sneak in the back door, he already knows some of their boys."

Dion felt a light sweat pop out on his forehead. "Yeah, I know, but remember, Joe's a newcomer himself. Maybe I oughta go with him some of the time, keep an eye—"

"Joe's got great eyes," the Old Man broke in. "The kind sees backwards and forwards at the same time. So have you, Dion, so why

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put two four-eyed guys on the same job? If Joe blows it, then I'll take a hand and I've still got you. Besides, you got your family here, you don't need to be running around."

About then whispers started up and down Commercial Row and around Lake and Center streets that there was a runner-up for crown prince. Dion didn't catch the whispers right away, it took him awhile. Which was a good thing for Joe's social life. Because by that time he had become real popular with the Galway females. Both Jerry and Pat were into a teenage crush on big, handsome, fun-fun "Uncle" Joe, who was keeping them supplied with expensive chocolates and wall-to-wall stuffed animals. Inga, their mother, considered Joe a darling lonely man who kept smiling to cover secret sorrow that he did not have his own wonderful children like her daughters. To fill this vacancy in his life she made a point of inviting him to all her lavish parties, determined that some lovely, also lonely, rich divorcee would latch onto him and eventually fill his need. She was cheered to discover that a number of almost-unattached ladies were quite ready to do this.

Joe was at the Galway home so regularly, always loaded with flowers for Inga and teddy bears and chocolates for the kids, dancing with pretty ladies including Inga and the twins in the big recreation room, that Dion began to brood about it. To aggravate this brooding, he kept remembering how relaxed and good-natured the Old Man always became when Joe showed up.

By the time the twins reached nineteen, and Joe his early thirties, practically the only thing Pat and Jerry agreed on was their deep affection for Uncle Joe. Both attended university, Jerry aiming for animal husbandry, Pat dreaming of stardom on Broadway via a drama major. Both were very grown-up, except when Uncle Joe was around. Then they were still kids, wrestling for his attention.

As he observed his daughters smother Joe with hugs and kisses upon his every arrival at the Galway spread, then squabble heatedly over which would dance with him first, Dion's brooding matured into hot-eyed suspicion. Particularly painful to note was that Jerry, his pride and joy surrogate son, always seemed to win. Extra heft and muscle gave her the advantage against the willowy Pat. Then before Pat could grab her turn on the dance floor, Jerry would rush Uncle Joe, arm in arm, out to the stables to admire her beloved horses. Pat, her underlip thrust out, would hasten after them to claim Joe's arm on the way back.

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Hot-eyed suspicion eventually effloresced into convinced reality, accompanied by rage, when word reached Dion from his and the Old Man's main club that its next-door subsidiary dining room was having the honor of Pat's presence almost every weekday noon, accompanied by a hungry coterie of university football hunks, Pat the generous hostess. Or was she? But no; a not so generous fatherly review of the meal ticket revealed that it had been signed by Joe. "Was Joe hiding inside those hulks?" Dion demanded of the maître d'. No, Joe just popped in, signed, and popped out, generous guy that he was.

"Oh sure, big-hearted snake," Dion mumbled to himself. "Cover-up, that's what. Just one more play for my kids. I got to do something about Joe."

Inga innocently brought something else to Dion's attention. With motherly concern she reported that Jerry was getting strange, locking herself in her room, then seemingly for no reason bursting out to quarrel with Pat. Once even wrestling Pat to the floor while Pat screamed, "Jealous fat old thing! You hate me because Uncle Joe buys my lunch!" Then Jerry had bounced Pat's head on the floor, yelling back, "You asked him! You keep asking him! You bring those boys along for camouflage!"

"My little girls are growing up," worried Inga. "And poor Joe caught in the middle because he's so kind."

I know where I'd like to catch him, Dion thought as he ran the information through his mind on his drive back to town. It's time I put the bastard out of the picture.

That night he tracked Joe down by telephone and invited him to his office for a little chat. When Joe showed up the handshake he got was big cordial stuff, but Dion's black eyes burning through slitted lids were not. Joe noticed.

"Joe, I'll waste no time. Plunge right in. I been noticing you and my girls are pretty damn chummy."

"What's new?" Joe asked easily, all good-natured. "Always been. Those kids are like my own, that is if I had any."

"You're a little short of their daddy age, Joe, unless you started daddying in early teens. So I'm laying it on the line. You're damn always at my house loading those girls with goodies, chatting up a storm, God only knows what you talk to them about. Because now you've got them fighting about you. Pat down at our restaurant every day, you feeding her, by God. I don't need nobody feeding my girls, she's got an allowance better'n most men make a month, to

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say nothing about she could put it on the house—"

"That's nothing but a kid stunt!" Joe broke in. "She wants a free lunch for that football team that's always trailing her. Kid stuff. She thinks you might put up a holler at the repeat bill or get too fatherly about the muscle she's running around with. Top of that, it makes her a big girl on campus, showing off about her dad's place of business."

"Yeah! That's not the way I see it! Neither does the maître d'. Don't try to con a man who wrote the book on conning. You been leading her on and Pat's picked up the boys for you to hide behind. Somehow my Jerry got roped in on that, now she's acting like some silly lovesick girl, lost interest in the ranch, you inveigling her down to the club trailing the ranch boys, maybe getting them to rough up the college kids, make a comedy outa my business."

Joe threw back his head and laughed.

Dion jumped to his feet. "By God, a crook like you, leading on my girls! I'll—"

"Ease off, Dion," Joe said softly. "Don't push this into something both of us will be sorry about. Those girls are just growing up. My sisters turned peculiar around that age, brooding around, crying if you pointed a finger at them, all kinds of weird female things. And as for Jerry, I don't think you can face the fact that she's a girl, not a boy."

"Don't tell me Jerry's just growing up. You been stuffing Inga with that kind of rot? Jerry's already grown-up, ready to take over the ranch. Two-three more years and I'll ease her into bigger responsibility. She's smart, she can run these clubs. Rides like a man, thinks like a man, she's got no business wasting time trying to be a fool girl. Now I'm a reasonable kinda man, Joe, you may be a little right about Pat and her gang at lunch. Pat's a girl all the way, doesn't hit things straight on, sidesteps the female way. Look how she may be cutting you out from her sister by corralling you down here at the club, handy as Jerry can cut out a horse from a herd. My Jerry comes out fighting, slam-bang, all up front."

"Dion, I'd never hurt those girls. They're great kids, but to me, kids. And I think it's outa line to dream up something like that to come between you and me, not in this business. The Old Man won't go for that kind of flying off on some kiddie ride. We're grown-up. On my part—"

Mention of the Old Man stirred up the banked fire in Dion, and it flared out. "Then get this straight—on my part I want you the

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hell out of Reno! Ask the Old Man to give you a jump start in Elko, Ely, maybe Las Vegas, Vegas is a comer, it'll be ready for the picking before long. Give you a big future, and I'll help you talk it up with the Old Man."

"The Old Man put you up to this?" Joe asked quietly.

Dion's head tipped back, as though reading an answer on the ceiling. "Haven't brought it up with him. Yet."

Joe smiled. "Wouldn't."

"Why not?"

"Like I said, kid stuff. Make him bust out laughing. Only not jolly. More like he'd be wondering what kinda guys he's got working with him, handling his money."

"Don't try to sidetrack me, Joe, you been building things up until I'm sick—all those damn teddy bears, candy, flowers, jollying the women, cracking jokes with the Old Man until he can't think straight for laughing, it's gone on too long!"

Joe's smile held, but his blue gaze was hard and straight. "Figured there was something deeper with you than teddy bears and free lunches."

"Cut the gaff! I'm gonna deal with something real simple. Like I'll be a helluva lot happier with you anywhere that's not Reno."

Joe nodded as though something in his mind had become clear, said, "I'll be as straight with you as you're trying to be with me. I've always admired you, partly because you're a good family man, really care about your wife and kids. One of these days I'd like to try for the same. But be reasonable, Dion. I'm a grown man. Won't make me feel good to be run outa Reno by teddy bears. No stuffed toys run me outa Tulsa; it was too many tricky characters hiding around too many corners. Anyway, Vegas and Elko are not my kinda towns, I like a town green with trees and a river running down its middle. If I had my druthers I'd even like to stay here long enough to be buried in Reno." He hesitated, let his grin get wider. "Naturally I want to be real old when that happens."

Dion's eyes flashed. "Some kinda meaning in that?"

The grin tightened. "Well, you read the papers same's I do. And they print about sometimes peculiar things that happen around Reno. Like that prominent business guy we both knew—fact is, he did business with you and the Old Man—and one afternoon with all the stores still open he vanished right off Virginia Street. Downtown, in broad daylight. Sheriff, police, everybody searched the whole damn state, big reward offered. Never did find the guy. Could

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be he trusted somebody too much and now he's paving the bottom of some godforsaken mine shaft. Or something. So if I get my druthers I don't want to leave town that way."

"I'd like to know what the hell that's got to do with moving on!"

"Like you suggested, Dion, let's cut the gaff. Here's my suggestion. You keep your girls home, out of anywhere near these clubs where I might be. If you can. Tell Inga not to invite me to your house no more, same for the girls. And from here on everything between you and me is strictly business. And my business is mine, same for you."

"I want you the hell outa town!"

Joe sighed, shook his head seemingly in wonderment, stood up. "Still seems to me it's more than your house and your girls you're anxious about. Could it be because my piece of business arrangements with the Old Man recently got a little bigger?"

Irish temper scalded Dion's cheeks. He sprang to his feet and flung open the office door. "The hell out!"

Joe took his time to the door. Stopped. "I meant it when I said I admired you. So this is a pretty dumb way for men who been friends to act."

"Who said we were friends!"

"I did." The grin crept back. "Did I ever mention what they used to call me at school? That dumb ox. Guess I never outgrowed it."

Out on the sidewalk, headed for his parked car, he warned himself, "Joe, here on out better watch your back and dark alleys. Maybe even in daylight. And be careful not to lean over any bridge to watch the fish swim down toward Pyramid Lake."

3.

After Joe's departure Dion paced the floor, also talking to himself. "By God, all I've done is give that damn poker face ideas. Can't ever tell what he's cooking up, eyes like a smile froze in blue glass. I better get Inga and the girls outa town, send 'em to Europe, keep 'em there all summer."

He sat at his desk, cogitating, then grabbed his hat, headed for the street and his car, and turned the car toward the Old Man's big gabled house above the river.

When he reached it he swore fervently. Joe's car was parked in its driveway. "Beat me," Dion muttered. "Inside, spouting jokes, maybe even about what we discussed, have the Old Man in stitches."

Furious, he turned back to his office. There, a slow, meditative search through files produced the number he sought and he put in

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a long-distance call to Tulsa. After that he telephoned Inga, informing her that she and the twins would soon have a big treat, would be on their way for a lengthy stay in Europe. "In the name of God, what put that idea in your head? I'm not having an affair, this is a special treat because those kids need to get a wider view of the world, not just concentrate on Reno. Get yourselves some nice travel things, shoot the works. Hey, I may even join you later along the way."

Near midnight Jerry clumped into the house, exhausted but triumphant. "Mom, I'm sure happy the boys got me down to the stables tonight," she announced, "because I got the first look at my future champion, a filly! Real beauty, bearing all the marks of her sire. She and I are going to prove a filly can outrace all the boys. I'm going to train her, bring her up right from this day one. Good thing university vacation is coming up, give me lots of free time."

"But, darling, you can't, not this summer— I have such great news, Daddy is giving us a marvelous gift. He just called insisting that Pat, you, and I go to Europe this summer as a special education for you girls, isn't that wonderful? Jerry, don't stick out your underlip, it's a marvelous opportunity and ever so much better than staying down in that smelly stable. Jerry, stop shaking your head—we'll have such fun shopping: designer clothes, museums and things, purses and belts in Italy—"

"No! I will not!"

"Don't go into one of your stubborn tantrums! Really, darling, you'll hurt Daddy's feelings when he's trying to be so good to us. The sudden trip surprised me too, but already I love the idea. We'll go on the biggest liner, dance and swim on board, have fun all the way."

"Won't! I'm afraid of boats and oceans, I love deserts and horses, and I won't leave my new filly!"

Inga reached Dion by phone at his office. "So, darling, you know how Jerry can get, and I really have to say you've always encouraged her to be—" she almost said "like you," changed it to "—independent. Now she has caused such a fuss that Pat is refusing to go too, says she's going to take a summer course at the U, some special drama project. I think maybe she was planning that as a surprise for us. She'll star in the play, and Jerry has this new female horse—"

"To hell with surprises and we got more horses than we need. I don't need any more surprises or horses. For God's sake, Inga, you're their mother, why haven't you seen this coming? Both those girls

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have fallen for that grinning, teddy-bear-toting Joe who's forever cluttering up our house! Refigure their plans to include Joe and you'll have a squabble over which one gets him for their very own teddy bear. Tonight I warned him never to enter our house again. I called the ranch foreman, told him to throw him off the place if he turns up. And you tell Pat not to set foot near our clubs or the restaurant; if she does I'll have her brought straight up to my office. And if any of Joe's presents arrive at the house, send 'em back. And as for Jerry—" His voice trailed off, got lost somewhere deep in his chest. "Inga, tomorrow first thing make those reservations for Europe."

Next morning, after a late-night argument between mother and daughters, Pat, a pouting angel, blond curls tied high on her head with a blue ribbon, came downstairs for breakfast. "Ooh, Pattie, how pretty you look, feel better this morning? Sweetheart, Daddy and I had another talk last night and, well, Daddy says you mustn't go down by the clubs or the restaurant anymore because—well, I dislike even mentioning it, but because he thinks you might, well, be fond of Uncle Joe, I mean too fond. Of course you're fond, but you mustn't ever be too fond. You're so young and, well, Uncle Joe is not actually your *uncle*. He's a *man*. Daddy said for me to make that clear."

"What in hell does Dad think we thought he was?" That question zoomed upon Inga and Pat from Jerry, leaning over the stair balustrade, glaring fiercely upon them. "Have we ever called him *Auntie?*"

"Don't be impudent, dear. It's just because he loves you that your father takes such interest. You girls are almost women and anything can—I mean might—"

"I'm already a woman, and it sure might!" Jerry proclaimed with deep conviction.

"Me too!" Pat echoed.

"Now you girls listen, Daddy is very determined. Now Pat, you must not take your friends to lunch at the club restaurant anymore, you have plenty of money to go some other place. And Jerry, you're not to take Joe to the stables again, that is if he gets past the ranch hands, the ranch is off limits and that's very disappointing to me, he's such a help when I have friends here, so you see Mother's also—" She gave a troubled sigh. "It's too bad this came up, but you girls must have brought it on yourselves, always making over Uncle—I

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mean, Joe. And maybe Joe feels bad too, because Daddy says Joe has to move to Las Vegas or somewhere."

"No!" Jerry shouted.

Pat began to cry.

4.

Dion took his turn at discussing this unhappy state of affairs with the Old Man. To his grave disappointment the Old Man chuckled—it made Dion flinch, his chuckle sounded so much like Joe's—and said he had to agree with Joe that Dion's concern, although laudable in a loving father, was pretty far-fetched. "Besides—and get this straight, Dion—our business don't need my two closest associates at loggerheads. Especially right now. We need a strong front. Talk reached me that some of those back-East hoods are on the way to muscle in on Reno. Now Reno's mine, been that way a long time and I want it to stay that way. Sure, once in a while we've borrowed some of their thugs for special jobs here and there, to keep our boys clean. But in our organization, no. So we've got to have solidarity, full cooperation. You and Joe make up."

Dion nodded. Inwardly his mind raced on how to give the Old Man what he wanted. Minus Joe.

On the same evening that Dion was worrying that around back in his office, Jerry was standing tiptoe in Joe's apartment living room, arms wrapped around Joe's neck, begging, "Please, please, Uncle Joe, marry me! I've been in love with you forever and ever." Her head nuzzled against his chin. "I'm nineteen now, I'm a woman, I can marry who I want. And I'm not going to Europe! I'm not even going back to university. I don't need a degree, I can hire veterinarians. I just want you, Uncle Joe. You and my horses."

"Looky here, honey, to me you're still a little girl, a wonderful little girl, and you got lots of time to pick out a man. I'm nothing but a poor old knockabout fake uncle. So you better just stick to your horses. Your daddy and I decided—"

"Damn what you decided! I do my own deciding!"

"Baby, be sensible. You and your little sister are like my own—"

"I am NOT like your kid! Pat maybe, but NOT ME! I've been grown-up all my life, riding, roping, cussing with the best ever since I could walk. Dad liked that, he wanted me for his boy. Well, I'm no boy, I'm all girl. I know all about mares and stallions, I know all—"

He gently pushed her away. "Jerry, baby, you don't know nothing about men. Or you wouldn't be here, hanging on my neck. Now you

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go on downstairs, climb in your car, and drive home. I'm due at the club to check things out. Be a good girl, git!" His wide, affectionate grin turned the order into a caress. He led her to his outer door, eased her into the hallway, closed the door. Then put his shoulders against it and took a deep, stretching breath. "Oh Christ!"

Give Joe credit. He tried.

After he finished his usual checkup down at the Club, he wandered out to Center Street, looking up appreciatively at the colored electric signs over the club's doorways, at pedestrians hurrying in and out of the next-door hotel, intent on various destinations. "Reno's a great town," he thought. "I'd like to stay."

He noticed Dion's big sedan drive slowly by the club entrance. Joe grinned, waved. *Out hound-dogging, planning to catch him a damn rabbit named Joe.* He pulled a packet of chewing gum from his pocket, unwrapped a couple of sticks, poked them in his mouth. Chewed ruminatively. *That little Jerry, never thought of her that way before, sure a beauty, fire and spunk.* Another thought edged beside it, *Mind this, Joe, pasture even a good strong stallion out in a cold lonely winter too long and he could end up crippled with rheumatism, fit for nothing.*

He stopped thinking and headed up Center Street to get his car, halted as a distressed wisp of a female voice called, "Uncle Joe!"

He bent and peered at the parked cars. A small white hand waved above the door of a low sports roadster with a canvas top. In back of it he glimpsed a pale heart-shaped face. "Here, Uncle Joe! Please!" It was Pat.

"What you doing here alone this time of night, honey? Saw your daddy just drive by, you looking for him?"

The heart-shaped face moaned. "No, no! Please, Uncle Joe, just get in the car! I don't want Daddy to see me, I have to talk to you." She threw open the car door. "Hurry! Before he sees me."

"Honey, your daddy and I kinda decided—"

"Get in!"

He slid in beside her. The car snorted and took off toward Virginia Street, then turned west along the light-flecked Truckee River, finally parked on a quiet side street.

"Okay, little girl, what's the trouble?"

"It's the Horse!" Pat sobbed.

He was startled. Jerry and horses, yes. But Pat, drama, ballet, dresses so form-fitting it'd be hard to climb aboard even a Shetland pony. What did Pat have to do with horses?

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What could he say about horses? "Well, honey, you get throwed, pick yourself up, get right back on."

"He threatens to leave Reno and never see me again if I won't run away with him!"

Joe patted the sobbing girl. *This ain't no regular horse, this is some smooth-talking bastard of a stud who—*

"But if I do, Daddy has such a terrible temper he may kill the Horse and keep me in Europe forever, maybe in a monastery!"

"Honey, monasteries are for priests, they ain't—"

"I love him, simply love him! Don't you remember him, Uncle Joe? That handsome curly-headed boy I always sat beside at lunch. I brought the other boys along so no one would guess the Horse was special. Actually his name is Herschel, but he hates that, so the team calls him the Horse on account of he's always galloping down the field to make touchdowns—he's marvelous, absolutely thrilling! Another university is trying to get him but I can't bear to have him leave me and our U, so Uncle Joe, please help me keep him here. If you help me tell Daddy about the Horse, that I want to marry him, that I never ever wanted to marry you, he'd be so relieved he'd agree to almost anything. Please, please!" and her arms twined around his neck.

He tugged gently at her arms. "Pat, you gotta talk to your mama about this, then she can talk to your dad; this is family stuff. Your dad might think I put you up to this."

She pushed his hands away and her grip around his neck tightened. She buried her face against his chest. "Please, please, please!"

Headlights rounded the corner behind them. A long black car slid in front of the roadster, parked. Dion Galway stepped out, walked back, thrust his face close to the two heads. "Clancy—Forshey, whoever the hell you are, you lied! Said you never bothered my girls. I'm through with this fooling around, I want you the hell-and-gone by morning. Anywhere, just gone! And don't go whining to the Old Man. Won't do any good after I tell him I caught you tonight!"

He yanked open the door, grabbed his daughter. She clung to Joe, whimpering, "It's not Uncle's Joe's fault, I asked him, I was the one—"

"Shut up!" Dion dragged her out of the car to his automobile, started the motor, shot down the street.

Joe sat quietly, listening to tires screech out of hearing. Then he pulled out the car keys, tucked them under the seat, and walked to the center of town where his own car was parked. He had enough

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time, he figured. Likely Dion would first take Pat home, deposit her with Inga, then head back to the Old Man's house to spill his story. "Catch him before he gets inside, explain the facts," he decided. "Maybe I can get his head screwed on right."

He drove across the river, up the tree-lined hill, parked beside the entrance to the Old Man's driveway. Eased into the padded leather seat, moved his big shoulders back and forth to relieve tension, rolled down his window to better hear any approaching car. Street light filtering through the leafy branches turned their shadows into a dizzy, mesmerizing dance over the sidewalk. Pretty sight, restful. Joe watched it, leaned back his head, let the evening's strain drift away.

He awakened at the touch of cold metal against his nose. "One yelp and it's over," warned Dion's equally cold voice. "I'll swear you came here to pick a bone with the Old Man, claiming he and I were plotting to kick you outa the business. All I did was protect him and myself. You're the Johnny-come-lately in Reno, Joe, been in trouble before, even shot a man. The cops will believe me. So will the Old Man after I tell him about finding you hugging my girl out in a parked car—get your damn hands up, keep 'em up!" With his free hand he opened the car door. "Nice and easy, out in the street!"

Joe raised his hands, slowly edged to the opening. "No sweat, Dion. I know how you'd feel if what you're thinking was true. Only it's not."

"Can it!"

"You've got it wrong." Joe's left foot felt for the pavement, set the sole of his shoe solidly upon it. "Your Irish temper's getting in the way."

"Shut up!"

"Okay, okay," Joe said meekly. His upper body braced against the seat back, his right leg pulled free of the steering shaft to join the left. But instead of joining it, the right leg, with 220 pounds of self-preservation behind it, slammed against the door, drove it and Dion into the car's hood. Pinned Dion between two pieces of hard metal. Joe stood over his captive gripping his gun hand. "Dion, the Old Man's sure gonna be boiled, having his right- and left-hand men fighting in his front yard, runs down the neighborhood." His voice was gentle, one friend to another. "Besides how it's gonna look in the papers. All over the country maybe. Give a whole bunch of crooks big confidence about taking over Reno."

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He gave the wrist a mild twist and stood erect, hefting the pistol. "Damn! You sure picked a cannon, didn't aim to miss."

Dion arose, his face a ghost's in the shadowed light, crouched to spring. "Hold it!" Joe warned coldly. "We already had our fun. Now listen good before one of us gets splashed all over the street. Your Pat is itching to get married, but not to me. To one of those football players I been feeding. I told you it was kid stuff. So tonight she asked old big-hearted Uncle Joe the sucker to help her nail this boy. Otherwise he threatens to leave town and her with her heart broke. She was begging me to talk to you about it, she's too scared. That's as far as she got when you showed up. You gonna commit murder for that? With Pat going hysterical, spilling to the world the real story? Then getting married anyway, only her daddy not at the wedding because he's in the pen?"

Brief silence.

"Which football player?"

"Better ask her."

"I don't think he's got a name. I think it's your cock-and-bull story to save your hide. I still want you gone. Besides, true or not, I've got more than one girl."

Joe switched off his mental flashback of the encounter with Jerry earlier that night.

"This is all a bunch of damn foolishness, Dion. We're businessmen, not feisty kids. Now slide to one side off that car hood. Easylike, no need for this car door to take another swing. While you're at it, think this over. I'm not leaving."

Once Dion was standing free, Joe broke open the pistol, removed the bullets, dropped them in his pocket, and tossed the gun against the curb. He got in his car, steadied the broken door with his left hand, turned the key, swung around Dion, and drove off.

As he headed home he remembered Jerry again, could almost feel her warm, stocky body against his, her strong arms dragging on his neck, pulling him close.

5.

At the Galway ranch Jerry was soundly sleeping when someone frantically shook her around midnight. Jerry came awake fighting, swung, hit something that yipped and fell. She blinked her eyes at her twin sprawled beside the bed. "What's the matter? Someone hurt? My filly, Mom, Dad?"

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"I'm hurt! And you did it!" Pat said angrily. "Jerry, I need your help. Dad's gone crazy! Absolutely insane! He says he's going to run Uncle Joe out of town, kill him or something, and he won't listen to me."

Jerry sprang out of bed. "Why?"

"I told you. Dad's lost his mind. He has this dumb idea I'm in love with Uncle Joe. And that you are, too. Imagine! In love, the marrying kind of love, with an old man almost thirty-five! It's the Horse I love, I want to marry the Horse, you know him, that adorable fullback I told you about. So I was in my car with Uncle Joe asking him to help explain things to Daddy. Just sitting there, and I was hugging him and begging—"

"You stop hugging him!"

"You're as dumb as Daddy! I only wanted him to help me marry the Horse, because if I don't the Horse will leave the U, so if I marry the Horse that'll certainly prove I don't love Uncle Joe that way. But all of a sudden Daddy was going insane."

"Why would you want to marry that half-baked kid? No wonder—"

"Shut up and listen! Because this very minute your great big wonderful old man may be getting shot!"

Jerry was pulling off her pajamas, stepping into briefs, riding trousers, pulling a sweater over her head, scrambling under the bed for her boots. She strode to the door, hesitated, came back to pick up her heavy silver-handled quirt off her dressing table. "Dumb, dumb men, I swear horses have more sense!"

She stomped down the stairs, and outside ran to the garage. She scooted under the wheel of her English sports car, backed and turned into the long ranch lane to the highway, and drove north. On the way her father's big dark car zoomed past in the opposite direction. Neither driver noticed the other, each too busy thinking.

Up in Reno, Joe was parked on a secluded turnaround, giving his arm a rest from hanging onto the sagging car door. Watching, too, to see if Dion's car came up the hill. Finally muttered, "Best place for you, Joe, is home, no sense hanging around here waiting for more trouble, no telling what kind of nutty ideas will pop up in the dark." Started the car, drove off. Nearing his apartment building, he took an observant swing around its parking lot. No, no unusual shadows, no unusual parking. He cut his motor, listened. No hasty scuffling.

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He left the car, used his key to enter the locked back entrance of the building, went upstairs to his corner apartment. Locked his door, fastened its extra chain lock, went to his bedroom.

Before undressing he checked the handgun kept loaded in his bedside table. Left the drawer slightly open, pulled off his clothes, slid naked into bed. He fell asleep fast, like an untroubled child.

The first ring of his bell from the front street entrance jerked him upright, wide awake. He swung his legs free of the covers, grabbed his pants, slid them on. Gun in hand, padded barefoot to the intercom located in his private entrance hallway. Into it he said cautiously, "Hello?"

The tube emitted a hoarse, choked whisper. "Uncle Joe—Joe? This is Jerry. I have to talk to you."

"It's late, baby. You better go on home. I have to tell you, your daddy's bad upset, cruising around, could be looking for you."

"I don't care, I can handle Dad. Please, Joe, I have to talk."

Joe pressed the buzzer, returned to the bedroom, hurriedly slipped on his undershirt. At the tap on his door, he opened it, a wide "Uncle" smile on his face. He drew Jerry inside. "Well now, baby girl, what's on your mind?"

Jerry's big dark eyes zeroed in on him. "Stop calling me that! And stop calling yourself my uncle! I'm no baby, I'm a woman and I love you. And I don't want you shot. Pat just told me Dad's threatening you and I won't have it!" The heavy quirt slapped against her twill trousers in angry emphasis. "Won't have it, hear? If there's shooting, they'll have to shoot me too. And if you leave town, I'll be with you. Just try to stop me!"

Joe choked back a delighted chuckle, tried to look solemn as he surveyed the defiant little figure before him, her legs spread in determined stance, quirt held menacingly, chin thrust forward, full rosy lips stubbornly set. *Man, I tell you, this sure is a woman.*

"Honey, you just about could be my daughter. I got around fifteen years over you."

"Damn fifteen years!"

It surprised him to realize that behind his resolutely aged pose his insides felt mighty young and nervous. Sweat started running down his back, his mouth was dry. Women never got to him much before, that was part of being Smiling Joe. But this was different. This little girl had hit her mark.

"Jerry, you got a lot of living ahead of you, schooling, fun, lots of things. Besides, you know how your daddy counts on you to be his

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boy, take over the ranch, maybe run his business someday, planned on it ever since you were a little tyke."

Jerry moved to him, reached around his neck, snuggled her head against his broad chest. The light pressure of the quirt she held trailed along his back. As she tugged his face close to hers, he wondered fleetingly if she was up to using the quirt on him if he held off. Not that he wanted to. And so, he didn't.

"Joe, I do love you," Jerry whispered. "Please, please marry me. It won't get in the way of Dad's plans. When we're married I can still run the ranch, and you can take care of the business part better than I could."

"Your daddy don't want me—" His answer broke off as a shuffle of sound came from the entrance hall. In that instant he remembered that he had left his gun in the bedroom and failed to relock the hall door after Jerry came in. Another rueful thought flashed through his mind—no apartment-house lock on a lobby door stops a professional with an urgent reason to enter. He swung Jerry behind him, backed toward the bedroom.

Too late. Two heavy-chinned, bulky young men, the one in front pointing a gun directly at him, stood in the living room doorway. "Hold it!" the front man ordered. Behind him the second man warned, "Go slow! That must be the Galway kid, her old man said the car was parked outside, and she better not be hurt."

"Kid, move away from the guy, nobody gonna hurt you," the front man ordered.

In a flash of movement, Jerry darted around Joe, quirt raised, slashing venomously back and forth. Silent, her face dark with fury. The front man lunged toward her and with a hiss like a rattlesnake the quirt bit into his right wrist. He yelped, the fingers of his right hand dangling helplessly as his gun bounced across the rug. The quirt was continuing in a hurricane of movement, slicing hands, faces of both men, never a hesitation. Joe grabbed the gun.

The man in back, arm guarding his bleeding face, made an oblique, slithering exit. Heavy steps pounded down the outer hallway. The second man crouched on the floor, arms wrapped around head and neck, blood streaming from slashes.

"Okay, honey, take a breather, you got it under control," Joe said. Then to the man on the floor, "Unwrap and stand up! Jerry, call the cops. I reckon this gun can handle things until you're back on the job. Phone's in the bedroom."

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The intruder cautiously arose. "Hey, that gun ain't loaded, them bullets are blanks. Galway said no real shooting."

"Well now, guess I better keep the little lady and her whip in here till I check out these bullets. One of your legs oughta prove whether you're a truthful guy."

"Hey! They're for real! I just—"

"Go on, honey, call the cops."

Jerry turned toward the bedroom. Stopped as her father plunged into the living room, gun in hand. The bleeding man wiped his face, scooted behind Dion, vanished.

It was a standoff, two guns aimed dead center, ten feet apart.

Jerry darted between her father and Joe.

"Now, looky here, Dion, see what you've gone and done!" Joe chided. "Let a couple mob thugs loose in Reno, helped 'em get a foothold. They'll be like cockroaches, never get rid of 'em."

"Jerry, get out of the way!"

Jerry's legs planted themselves solidly and defiantly on the blood-splattered rug. "Don't be ridiculous, Daddy. I'm not moving until you're both rid of those guns. Besides, Joe didn't start this, this isn't even his gun, it belongs to those crazies you sent up here, aren't you ashamed!"

"Yeah, and I didn't even get to use their gun," Joe said regretfully. "Your little girl whipped 'em both with that pretty loaded leather whip. Fact, Dion, it don't pay to cross her. I tried, but she bested me."

"What's that mean?"

"It means I made Joe promise to marry me."

"I'll see him dead first!"

Jerry's jaw set. "Dad, listen to this. I'm giving you a rock-solid promise. If I don't marry Joe, I'll never marry anyone. You think I'm too young to mean that? Don't try me, I'll show you what can happen with your make-believe son. I'll turn into your old maid, sit-around-the-house daughter. Never ride another horse, sell all mine. Leave the ranch. Take up knitting, knit enough sweaters to warm everybody in Nevada. I don't marry Joe, you've lost me." Abruptly she held out her arms. "Oh, Daddy, let's be sensible. Be like we were, only with Joe and me married. I'll run the ranch just like you planned. You and Joe can run the business, I don't like the business anyway. Please, Daddy. Friends?"

She walked to her father, kissed his cheek, patted his hand, came away with his gun. Returned to Joe, took his gun. "I hate guns, they're too final."

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Joe grinned. "Yeah, better stick to that little play-toy you just handled so nice." But the grin faded as he faced Dion. "By the way, you happen to warn the Old Man about these stranger thugs being here in town? Or maybe you called 'em in, local boys wouldn't do what you had in mind."

Dion ignored him. His gaze burned on his daughter. "He'll be no son-in-law of mine. Been around too much. Too old."

Jerry put a reflective eye on her father. "Daddy, I listen a lot to stable talk when the boys don't know I'm around. And what I hear tells me you've been around a lot. Now with that kind of history, how come you turned out so good to Mom, and your daughters? So if it worked out okay, with you, why can't it work out for Joe?"

Father and daughter stared at each other, each trying to force down the other's gaze. A brief sad chill froze its way through Joe's middle. *Neither going to give in, guess it'll be me doing it at the end.*

Silent, motionless, the three seemed caught in amber. Then the fire in Dion's eyes banked as he looked into the black eyes that matched his. He moved toward the entrance hall. "I'm going home. Jerry, come with me, we can talk this out better at home, with your mother."

"I'll not change my mind."

"At least we can talk. Get a better feeling."

Joe broke in, "Go with your daddy, honey. We'll all do better with a little rest."

At the door, Jerry beside him, Dion turned toward Joe. "Too bad all this had to come up."

"Yeah. Feel the same."

Joe watched father and daughter walk away, down the long hallway to the front stairs. Jerry turned and waved. He waved back, went inside his hall, locked the door. He clicked off the living room lights and carefully parted the drapes that covered the angled corner windows. Below was the parking lot and street, the latter spotted with faint light from the distant street lamp. Soon he saw Jerry, her father beside her, get into her sports car. Dion kissed her, stepped back to watch the little car disappear. He walked then to his car which was parked near the street, bent forward to peer across the way into a dark empty lot.

Within a few minutes two large male figures, their outlines mottled by leafy shadows, moved into view on the opposite sidewalk. They hurried across the street, slid inside the car through the door Dion held open.

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"Figured that," Joe muttered.

The car did a U-turn, headed for Reno's downtown center. "Calling them off?" Joe asked himself. He kept watching.

For nearly an hour he waited at the window. There was no movement or sound on the street below. "Yeah, called off the thugs," he finally decided. "For tonight anyway." Yawning, he returned to the bedroom, peeled off his clothes a second time. Tossed around the bed awhile, then fell into a deep, exhausted sleep.

6.

Joe didn't really wake up. His head was too full of fog. In that nightmare state he became scared of himself, terrified by his own gasps that sucked the air from his lungs, gagging at a throat grown too narrow to let the gasp emerge. Through no will from himself his legs dragged and stumbled over the floor, legs mere jelly slithering through space. Both arms, gripped by an unknown force, drew him through nothingness. No. Couldn't be nothingness. Because the stair banister rippled past him, seemed to change into a fat brown snake writhing toward escape.

He tried to call for help, tried to catch the snake, escape with it. But his tongue was too heavy, too fat, to free the sound. For an instant his mind steadied—*HOW—THE DOOR, CHAIN—MAYBE NOT—UH CLIPPERS?—UH?* The question and the answer gargled in his throat as a stifling something dropped on his face and he fell into darkness.

Light returned. Gray light, dawn light. He was in open space, large blurred shapes either side of him, dragging him over stones and brush. He tried to ask the shapes to let him stand up or lie down, he didn't care which, but the effort merely ended in a groan. His feet kept bumping, bumping over the rough ground.

Then once more he fell into dark, down, down through cold dark air, into a black pit that lasted forever.

7.

Reno's old-time residents used to talk a lot about the Galway family—well, used to means the old days, early thirties, into the forties—around bridge and poker tables, in bars, or wherever in late nights folks tend to ponder life's whimsies. But after old Dion Galway and his wife Inga passed on the talk dwindled. Especially after the only Galway left in Reno to remind folks about the story was that fat weird old-maid daughter, and all she did was stay home.

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Her twin sister, the pretty one, was long gone, married a hotshot football coach, was it San Francisco or Seattle where they settled?

Screwy about those twins, one normal, one freaky, didn't look a bit alike. One slim, elegant. The other, muscles like a boy, square-built, finally turned into a tub. Hard to believe that tub used to be a regular tomboy—or cowboy, more like it. Always running around with her dad's ranch hands. Her daddy's fault, she was his favorite, he spoiled her rotten. Remember when, years back, she cleaned out his stables, sold all those gorgeous Arabians and quarter horses, his along with hers, and all he did was say everything he owned was hers anyway, it was her right.

When she moved off the ranch and bought a house in town, he sold all the Galway property, club shares too, and bought a house beside hers. That was when his wife left him, moved to the coast to be with the pretty twin, stayed there, died there.

Dion Galway turned so crazy—guess his girl came by it naturally—that he holed up like she did, just stayed in his house, staring through the windows trying to get a glimpse of his pet. A few years of that and finally the girl gave in a little, let the old man move in with her. But what good did that do? Never spoke a word to him, that is, directly, their maids told around she spoke through them and not much of that. Shocked them, because every now and then that fat daughter would look up over her knitting needles and spit out, "Murderer!"

See what we mean? Crazy, real crazy. Especially after all her daddy did for her.

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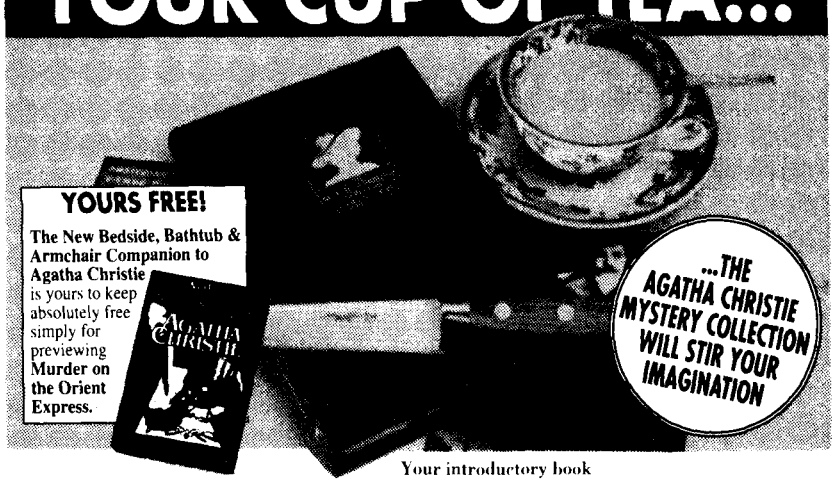
IF MURDER IS YOUR CUP OF TEA...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The author of more than two dozen published novels, Roger Ormerod made his debut in the short story form with the publication of this piece in the U.K. anthology 1st Culprit. *The thoroughly unique, slightly fey quality of his fiction will endear him, we are sure, to readers of* EQMM. . . .

A DISTANT AFFRAY

by ROGER ORMEROD

THE PRINCIPAL

Dear Sir,

Please accept my most abject apologies for having missed most of the lectures in our weekend seminar. I am myself disappointed, this being the only course you conduct yourself, and as I have a keen interest in its subject: The Road to Success. The fact is that I have been beset, recently, by domestic problems, that much I can put forward as an excuse. But—as you so often say—excuses are empty, only reasons carry weight. I therefore offer the following explanation.

I do not think you have met my wife, as she has always refused to join me on our weekend courses. I have put forward every possible persuasion. But no. She has resolutely refused, and has always disapproved of my own weekend breaks. What, she kept asking, was the attraction? I believe she thought I was meeting another woman, which is not so. But now, more recently, she has changed. You will understand that this worried me, as the change was abrupt, and dates from two months ago. At that time she began actively to encourage me, even going so far as to comb your brochure for other weekend courses I might attend, such as Macramé for Beginners and Welsh for Seasoned Travellers. For this latest particular weekend she couldn't get rid of me quickly enough, with the result that I was on the road before the mist lifted on Friday, and had to spend

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half the day exploring remote corners of Wales, where the Welsh-speaking course would have been useful, in order to sign in promptly at five-thirty.

You may appreciate, sir, that her strange behaviour caused me concern, as I couldn't help wondering whether it had any connection with our new neighbour, Colin, who moved in about two months ago. Coincidence, of course, though he is younger than me, and unattached, as they say. Well, he doesn't need to be—he's one of those smooth and fascinating city types who only has to raise an eyebrow. The ladies around the avenue positively fall over each other for his smile. He's not much good in the garden, though. You should *see* his lawn.

You may not have observed that I spoke not a word during dinner that Friday evening. Immediately afterwards, I went along to the pay phone on the lower landing and called home. Or rather, I phoned next door, my intention being to tell Colin that I was worried about my wife's behaviour, and to ask him whether he would mind keeping an eye on her for me. Unfortunately there was no reply, so I phoned my wife.

I should explain that there's no reason for delay in answering, as we have extensions all over the house. But it rang on and on, and I was really worried when she eventually answered.

She sounded short of breath. I asked whether she was all right. She said she was, rather shortly, I thought. I said I didn't like the sound of her breathing, and she ought to ask the doctor to look at her chest, but she claimed there was nothing wrong with her chest and I had to agree with that, so she demanded to know what I wanted. I said that I had forgotten to tell her that when I did the shopping I'd had to buy Woof for our dog, Jason, instead of his usual Growl, and would she hide the label from him when she opened his tins. She said she would do that. He watches all the adverts, you see. She asked was that all, and I had to admit it was, but she didn't hear the last bit because she'd rung off.

That, sir, was why I missed part of your opening lecture on Accomplishment and Endurance, and the subsequent debate, which carried over into the bar, I understand. In fact, I went to my room early, so immersed was I in all that worrying.

Naturally, I couldn't sleep. You will understand that, as you no doubt covered this aspect in your Saturday-morning exposition on Concentration and Distraction. At around two in the morning—I cannot be certain of the exact time—I got up and went along to the

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phone, and called my wife again. Just to hear her voice.

Her breathing was much better, I was glad to hear, though her temper was somewhat short. She didn't seem pleased to hear my voice. No tit-for-tat in our marriage, that I think has been the trouble. I said I'd forgotten to remind her that she ought to take Jason for his walk, last thing. She assured me she'd done that, but in the distance I could hear him howling. Great Danes have a mellow voice, you know. I suggested she should look behind the settee in the morning, as Woof often upsets his stomach. She promised she would and asked whether I minded if she got back to sleep. It didn't sound to me as though she'd *been* asleep, but I agreed she could, not mentioning that I was certain I wouldn't be able to, and returned to my lonely room.

I'm sure, sir, that you know how it can be in the small, chill hours of the night. Reality goes all to pot, panic sets in, and you imagine all sorts of things. She has never failed to sleep very soundly when I am lying beside her, so perhaps my absence was in some way disturbing her sleep pattern. I found this thought flattering. But there was a possibility, remote perhaps but quite valid to me at the time—my agony of concern being a very real one—that she had started taking sleeping tablets. And that, finding one ineffective, she had maybe taken another. Or more. Would that explain her previous shortness of breath? Would it explain her definite shortness of patience with me?

This possibility occurred to me at about four in the morning. In a minor panic I stumbled along the corridor to the phone. I dialled our number. There was no reply. The phone is right by the bed. What was I to think? My panic was rapidly taking control. I'm sure you have a word, sir, for this behavioural pattern, and will understand when I admit that I could think of no other course but to phone our friend Colin, next door. I was, by then, prepared to take extreme measures.

Perhaps the pollen count in our district was high, but when he answered, without a second's delay, he too wasn't breathing very easily.

I told him about my worry, and the basis of it: that she had perhaps taken sleeping tablets, and maybe had even taken an overdose. He conceded that it was a possibility, no more, but otherwise didn't interrupt. I asked him, tentatively you understand, because of the time, whether he would see if she was all right. He said it was no trouble at all to do that, see she was all right, he meant. I had to

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get him to promise to call back as soon as he had. He assured me it shouldn't take long.

I paced that stretch of landing by the phone for half an hour. Did you know, sir, that the heating goes off completely in the early morning? I felt I did not dare to leave the phone long enough to fetch my dressing gown. He didn't call back. I tried his number again, and got the engaged tone. Five times I got it, and had to tell myself that there are people who fumble when replacing a handset, especially when their minds aren't on it. In desperation, I tried to get my wife again. No reply.

You will have discovered by now, sir, that there is a chip out of the phone on the lower landing, where I hammered it against the wall. On receipt of the repair bill I will honour it at once. (Likewise with the wall, of course, sir.)

On Saturday morning, you will understand, I felt terrible. Maybe I'd had an hour's sleep. Certainly I cannot recall breakfast. After the meal, assuming I ate any, I was forced once again to forgo a lecture, as it seemed critically important to speak to my wife. I phoned home. No answer. So I phoned my mate Colin next door. Line engaged. So I went for a walk round the college grounds in order to cool off. Visions of my wife in a coma came to haunt me. Visions of Jason not getting his breakfast. Worse still, not getting his morning walk. The space behind the settee is limited, and he's a big dog.

I returned inside, having made a decision, and phoned the RSPCA. You don't like to worry the police, do you, though they suggested I ought to do that, but after ten minutes they agreed to send an inspector round. He would call me back, they promised. There's a phone booth right opposite our front door. More waiting . . . I paced the lower landing. Half an hour later the clown called back to tell me there was no sound from the house. I asked if he'd shouted the magic word Jason through the letterbox. He said he hadn't known the animal's name, so he went back to try that.

Ten minutes later he called me again. Ten minutes—just to shout Jason! Nothing had happened. Surely she couldn't have given Jason sleeping tablets, too!

I admit to a certain amount of hysteria entering into the situation at that point. I said he had to get in there, and he told me he would have to get permission to use force, and I said he had it, but he wanted it in writing, at which time I think I shouted a little and said he could have a retrospective deposition in writing . . . but the

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long words floored him. I thought we had reached an impasse, but at that point another voice, calm and assured, interrupted. The police had arrived. I shouted for them to smash down the door—smash it down! He made soothing noises, and hung up on me.

Some time later—I was way beyond counting—he rang back to say they'd gained access, as he called it, and the house was empty. There was no sign of my wife's car, nor of Jason.

But I'd had time, you see. I had realised, during that waiting period, what must have happened. I asked whether the house next door on the right was also empty, and when he said it was I said Ah! He asked me what Ah meant, and I had to admit that I'd made a stupid mistake in trusting our neighbour. Colin Something, I said his name was, and I'd told this Colin that she was alone in the house and I'd asked him to keep an eye on her. And he's always seemed a bit strange to me, now I came to think about it, sort of oversexed, if the constable knew what I meant. He said he'd heard about it, cleared his throat, and suggested I should make such a serious charge as this—when I hadn't made one—to his inspector. He gave me the number and I tried it.

Patient chap, that inspector. I told him everything, and he expressed an opinion that it didn't have to mean anything as serious as assault. I asked him what else it could be, so he told me, and I said don't be stupid, she's not like that.

At this point there was a short pause, then he asked whether I was suggesting physical violence. He sounded a little cool. I said I wouldn't put it past her if my friend Colin tried anything, and maybe in the struggle . . . you know. . . . He thought about it again, taking precious time and my precious money, I thought, then he said that, as both houses were empty, perhaps I might have a suggestion as to where they might be. Where Colin might have taken her, that is.

I thought his interest had perked up at the thought that there might be a body to be found.

Really, it didn't take much thought, as dear Colin had spoken proudly and often about it. He had a weekend cottage on the river somewhere in Shropshire. I didn't know exactly where, but Madge would know, Madge at No. 17, that was, and if not her try Edna at No. 24, or Jessie at No. 3—oh, pretty well any of the ladies in the avenue. He sounded dubious, but promised he would give it a try. He would, he promised, phone back.

You will appreciate, sir, that this was going to take a little time. But I didn't care to desert the lower landing for long. I snatched a

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bit of lunch, but unfortunately had to miss your lecture on Desperation and Persistence. But the waiting time extended itself, and with the passage of it my nerves settled down, if not my fears, and I realised that it was, indeed, Saturday. And Saturday has always been my wife's day to tour the shops in town, including lunch there. She always took Jason along to scowl from inside the car. Better than those alarm bleepers, I always think.

I decided that the inspector ought to know this, in case it affected his actions. As my hand reached for the phone, it rang. It was for me. It was him.

I never did get to telling him, he spoke so rapidly and with a kind of suppressed tone. It appeared that the local force in Shropshire had located the cottage, and discovered Colin in bed with Madge from No. 17. They had reported back, so that my inspector had gone along to our place to check the situation. Yes, my wife was at home. She was, in fact, at that time standing in the drive and staring at the front door, which was flat on its back. So of course he had had to explain. In detail. Apparently, she had been quite violent and vocal, equally when she heard about Madge from No. 17. When she let Jason out of the car the inspector had retired from the scene, rapidly, I believe. She was still shouting outside his side window when he drove away.

He asked, then, where I was calling from. I explained that it was a weekend course at an adult residential college. He asked how far away and I told him just over a hundred miles, and he said just as well but he didn't blame me, and was it a dirty weekend? I said it hadn't worked out like that, so far, but there was still time. One has to pretend to a certain amount of nonchalance in these situations, don't you think? But really, I was too exhausted. We hung up as friends.

This was not the end of it, but fortunately no more phoning was involved, as I was running out of change. I don't know whether you noticed, sir, but I was missing for a large part of Saturday evening. The local police sent a car for me, and they ran me down to the station. Another inspector. Wales has some very pleasant policemen, I find. We chatted. He explained that my wife was at that moment in custody, charged with grievous bodily harm inflicted with a deadly weapon, to wit, one shotgun. I had to admit that I'd forgotten to mention I owned such a weapon. He tutted a little, shaking his head, then told me that Madge was expected to recover, but the word was, from the hospital, that Colin would have no future practical use for

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his cottage. He raised his eyebrows at me and asked me whether she was usually that violent.

I shook my head. My opinion, which I expressed, was that something must have provoked her, though I couldn't imagine what that might have been, but the circumstances hadn't been normal, had they?

He cleared his throat and said no, they weren't normal for Wales—men shooing one woman out of their bed just in time to take another woman to their cottage. Not in Wales. I detected a certain amount of envy in his voice.

I asked after Jason. He was being cared for by the lady next door on the left, I was assured. That would be Tina, a most attractive widow with a sense of humour.

My wife phoned this morning. She is out on bail and staying at a quiet hotel, for her nerves. Tina is taking some of her things along and will tell her I've recovered from the experience. My wife tells me she has seen a solicitor about divorce proceedings, and doesn't expect me to contest it. She sounded doubtful and tentative, but I'm sure Tina will encourage her to accept that divorce is the best solution. I'm to have custody of Jason.

Sir . . . one small point. Has anyone handed in a small drawstring pigskin bag, which I left on the shelf beneath the phone on the lower landing? I am not concerned about the small amount of coins in it, which you could count towards repair of the phone—and the wall—and there couldn't be more than £2 left from the £5 I brought with me. But the bag is a keepsake. I used to keep my marbles in it, as a child. I still have all my marbles, so I really need the bag.

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There is something particularly horrifying about crimes committed by children, however frequently we are now confronted with them in reality. In this very short fiction, Suzanne Jones takes us back to a time of relative innocence, and a memory evoked by a ginger cat. . . .

SURVIVOR

by SUZANNE JONES

The ginger cat reminds me of Patty Cutter. It slinks across the deck and boldly looks through the sliding glass door before bending its head to the food I leave out for the raccoons. It has the same pale eyes that Cutter had, pink nose and orange hair that I remember, even after all these years.

It is a stray and probably will come to a bad end.

Willie hates the ginger cat, and they bawl fiercely at each other through the glass and butt their heads against it and hiss and claw and posture and posture.

Cutter was from Enid, Oklahoma, and was small, freckled, and wiry, with several interesting warts on her knuckles. We were in the second grade together, first in Ras Tanura, then, when our houses were finished, in American City.

She was an only child, as I was, and we were fast friends, then mortal enemies, opposing each other whenever we could. I forget now the reasons. It was over forty years ago that our fathers worked for ARAMCO, the Arabian American Oil Company on the edge of the Persian Gulf.

The water there was dark blue, the skies cloudless, the air clear and shimmering.

Mother used to put on a hat with a large brim, a long robe over her bathing suit—although I never saw her go in the water in all the months we were there—and would walk with me to the beach and sit with the other mothers while the children played.

There was a pool of fresh water at the edge of the sea. The water was from the air conditioners in camp and thundered out of a large

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pipe with a wooden collar on it that held it high above the surface of the pool.

We were absolutely forbidden to go near the pool, which had become very deep beneath the rush of water, blue green in its depth. The water was very cold coming out of the pipe, but as it fanned out onto the sand before running in a little stream to the sea, it was pleasantly cool at the edges, though it smelled like musty straw.

I wonder now at the courage or carelessness of the women, because in the sea there were jellyfish, some of which were poisonous, and Portuguese men-of-war which were very poisonous, and sea snakes which were deadly.

I saw one once, dead and hanging over the compound fence. I thought it was a piece of cable, and I leaped up to grab it. Its body was warm from the sun, and the fingers of my hand left their imprint on it in little curves. It was Cutter who sneered at my screams.

When we were first in camp, the children my age and older had swum out to a raft, anchored in deep water. I swam out to it, but struggled and struggled to lift myself onto it, scraping my legs in the process. I finally heaved myself up on the canvas-covered boards, and the others, legs flashing white, went diving off the other side, leaving me alone, panting there.

"There's a ladder on the other side, stupid!"

I'm sure that was Cutter's high, thin voice.

After a few minutes of being all alone on the dark blue sea, my eyes stinging from the salt in the water, I too dived in and swam back to the shore that lay like a clean white ribbon between the water and the jumble of brownish sand and camp buildings that trembled in the distance.

At first the sores were small and mostly unnoticed. They multiplied and became worse, but still I said nothing. I hated doctors so much I think because of all the shots we had to have to come to this place: typhoid, typhus, malaria, cholera, diphtheria, small pox—some of the names I remember. Scores of shots, two a day, with both arms swollen and sore from the day before.

The doctor, the only doctor there, was named Black and later was judged too incompetent even to tend the Americans in Ras Tanura, and drank himself to death eventually in Abqaiq.

The treatment he prescribed for fungus infection consisted of scraping off the scabs which now covered my legs from ankle to thigh, painting the open sores with Merthiolate, and wrapping them in heavy gauze bandages. Every week.

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Week after week.

Mother would pull me screaming into the clinic, and I would sit in the whirlpool bath to soak the bandages off and butt any nurse foolish enough to come near me.

Week after week.

I will say this for Dr. Black. There are no scars on my legs.

My condition, however, served to remove us from the community of active children at a time when I needed to establish myself in my rivalry with Cutter. Because I had to stay indoors, I became friends instead with Nora, whose mother kept her inside because of the fairness of her skin. Nora, with whom no one was friends.

We played quietly together in the dark house, blinds drawn against the heat. Played very quietly because Nora's father worked the graveyard shift and slept during the day. After a while we made too much noise, and I was asked not to come back.

Fortunately, my mother had either grown too bored to resist or had become less fearful of my being on my own, because when I could bend my legs again, I could go down to the beach alone, not to swim, not to go into the sea, but to walk on the hard, wet sand where it was easiest to walk, and shoot the jellyfish with arrows from the bow I had made myself. I only shot the ones with a dark bluish-purple spot within like a feathery seed, which I considered poisonous. I would then sling them back into the sea.

As I walked there, Setta often appeared. Setta was my age, had dark hair cut short, a withered arm, and wore a T-shirt with blue and white bands on it. She had been my best friend in Texas, where we lived next door to each other. There we were together every day, walked to kindergarten together, played in the dust beneath the huge chinaberry tree on the alley at the very edge of her backyard. The chinaberry tree was the largest tree I had ever seen at the time, too large even to climb up into. Beneath it, sunk in smooth gray stones, was the pond in which we sought the goldfish, where I waded in my father's old cowboy boots, which came above my knees. But they let in the water anyway, cold at my toes, wetting my socks.

"It isn't the way they said it would be at all," Setta said. "Not at all. Your father said they use rubies for money here, but they don't. And the sand is brown and full of thorns. Look at the sky, so far away and hot and full of light, and the brown sand goes on forever. I miss my chinaberry tree, and my fishpond and the cold stones beneath my feet."

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Through the large blue and white bands of her shirt, I could dimly see the sea.

I saw Cutter standing on the pipe on my way back to the camp on a day when Setta had become as thin as smoke. Cutter had climbed around the huge wooden collar with ease and stood staring down at the water rushing out of the pipe. Why she was alone there, and why she had gone out onto the pipe, I do not know. I was thrilled by her daring and pleasantly intrigued by the knowledge that she was sure to be punished.

She crept barefoot to the very end of the pipe where the water looked almost solid as it poured into space. She squatted there and then put her hand out.

I think she only meant to caress it, to feel that solid cold as it bent to the pool below, but it pulled her from the pipe and drove her deeply into the water.

I saw her rise frantically, making a sound like a frightened bird, but the water beat her down again and again. And then she was floating facedown at the edge of the white water, her orange hair fanning out delicately. I wondered how it would feel to float like that with all of the front of you in the cold water and your back to the hot sun, float and describe lazy circles, looking down into the blue green water.

Then they all came, shouting, crying, and pulled her from the pool.

No one ever asked me why I did not run up the hill to the camp to get help, though I heard them talking about it in whispers. If they had asked, I'm not sure how I might have answered. As I think back now, it was probably curiosity that kept me there, watching. Death was a stranger to me then, and I wanted to know him better.

Or maybe I sensed it was a way home for both Cutter and me.

Every day I fill the gray plastic bowl on the deck with food. I tell Willie it is for the raccoons, but it is really for the ginger cat.

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THE JURY BOX
by JON L. BREEN

One characteristic that marks the really great ones in any field is the ability to excel in more than one area. Fred Astaire is most remembered as a dancer, but many songwriters felt he was the best of his time in interpreting the lyrics of a popular song. All his homerun-hitting heroics obscure the fact that Babe Ruth began his baseball career as a great *pitcher*. And the next time you peruse a boxscore for the awesome offensive statistics of Michael Jordan, bear in mind that some have called him basketball's greatest *defensive* player.

I have always admired the mystery field's all-rounders, the writers who not only produced outstanding fiction but made contributions as scholars, critics, editors, and historians, people like the Frederic Dannay half of Ellery Queen (bibliographer, anthologist, and for four decades editor of this magazine), Vincent Starrett (eminent Sherlockian), Anthony Boucher (influential *New York Times* mystery reviewer, for whom the annual Bouchercon mystery convention was named), and Dorothy B. Hughes (reviewer and Erle Stanley Gardner biographer). Prominent recent examples include Bill Pronzini, Marcia Muller, Francis M. Nevins, Jr., and H.R.F. Keating.

But the greatest all-rounder of them all may be Julian Symons, whose eightieth birthday was enthusiastically celebrated last year by the British literary community. Not only does Symons have impressive credentials within the crime fiction genre as novelist, critic, historian, anthologist, and general commentator, he is a formidable figure *outside* the genre as critic, biographer, poet, and historian. His famed history *Bloody Murder: From the Detective Story to the Crime Novel* has recently appeared in its third revised (and ostensibly final) edition (Mysterious, $21.95). Agree or not about his likes (Michael Dibdin, Sue Grafton, Loren Estleman, Colin Dexter) and dislikes (Ellis Peters, Thomas Harris, James Ellroy, Andrew Vachss) among the newly covered writers, his opinions are always provocative and engagingly argued. And he is also in good fictional form in his most recent crime novel.

**** Julian Symons: *Something Like a Love Affair,* Mysterious, $17.95. Judith Lassiter, the vaguely dissatisfied suburban wife of an architect, begins a love affair with a young driving instructor. There are reminders of such British classics as *Lady Chatterly* and the film *Brief Encounter,* but the structural trickery most reminded me of an otherwise dissimilar American mystery, Pat McGerr's *Pick Your Victim*. Most of the novel's action comes in flashback.

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In the present, the reader knows a murder has been committed but is in the dark as to both killer and victim. Symons's twist ending manages to surprise the reader without bending credulity or violating the psychology of his characters.

**** Ed McBain: *Mary, Mary,* Warner, $19.95. McBain, long celebrated as the king of the police procedural, proved with *The Paper Dragon* (1967; as by Evan Hunter) he can also do as good a Big Trial novel as anybody. In the latest case for Florida lawyer Matthew Hope, until now not seen in courtroom action, he proves it again. Hope's client is retired schoolteacher Mary Barton, accused of the murder of three small girls, and neither Hope nor the reader is sure about his client's guilt or innocence. McBain's unusual misdirection cries out for an extended discussion, but the rules of mystery reviewing forbid. (Shortly before reaching the climax, I concocted an essay question for students of mystery construction: Was McBain wise to telegraph his solution as pointedly as he did? Without the broad hints, would the denouement have been more effective or would it have been as unprepared for as a rabbit out of a hat?)

**** P. D. James: *The Children of Men,* Knopf, $22. Continuing the theme of versatility, one of the formal detective story's best and most successful contemporary practitioners now turns to science fiction. I don't know yet what the reaction of the s.f. community, notoriously unfriendly to extrageneric invaders, will be to this novel, but to me the extrapolation of a fascinating what-if situation—what would the world of 2121 be like if the human race stopped reproducing in 1995?—is played out both logically and chillingly. Schools are converted to other purposes. Frustrated would-be mothers wheel dolls around in baby carriages. Films and recordings of children are either treasured or avoided as just too painful. The ageing population obsesses on staying healthy, while the last generation of youth give new meaning to alienation.

*** Daniel Ransom: *The Long Midnight,* Dell, $4.99. In a Chicago-based mixed-genre thriller somewhat in the tradition of Dean R. Koontz, a series of mysterious deaths have associations with Perpetual Light, an unconventional school for orphans where Dr. Richard Candlemass carried out studies of ESP—and from which several students emerged with frightening powers. Though this is longer at 263 pages than most of the westerns and private eye novels the author writes as Ed Gorman, he remains a notably economical writer. Many novelists could easily stretch the amount of plot and incident here to 600 pages or more, but it couldn't be any more effective.

*** E. X. Giroux: *A Death for a Dodo,* St. Martin's, $17.95. The latest traditional whodunit about British barrister Robert Forsythe finds him recuperating from knee

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surgery in an upscale convalescent facility where most of his fellow patients have some connection to the poisoning murder of a family years before. Some regular readers will regret the absence of Miss Sanderson as co-sleuth, and the climax is unpleasantly violent enough to endanger Giroux's cozy union card, but otherwise the book is up to the standard of a reliably entertaining series. Anglophiles may second-guess some of the Canadian author's details. I seriously doubt that macabre British phrase "made redundant" has been displaced by the North American "laid off." And chili con carne seems an odd dish to be coming out of a British kitchen even today, let alone seventeen years ago when the story's poisonings took place.

*** Will Harriss: *Noble Rot*, St. Martin's, $17.95. The author of the Edgar winner for best first mystery of 1983, *The Bay Psalm Book Murder*, has produced an enjoyable book for readers who like plenty of specialized background detail. Vinnie Letessier, a young career college student who has run through his inherited fortune, takes a job with his uncle's Napa Valley winery just in time to find a dead body in one of the tanks. Harriss's love of multi-lingual word play is on display, and Vinnie becomes less of an exasperating twit as the book goes on.

For the reference shelf is the first solo book by one of the field's most knowledgeable critic-commentators, Marvin Lachman's *A Reader's Guide to the American Novel of Detection* (G.K. Hall, $45). Most police and private detectives are excluded, for coverage in other guides, but Lachman offers the most thorough source yet on American amateur sleuths, offering plot summaries of 1,314 titles by 166 authors. There are also various helpful indexes (by detective's occupation, period, location, setting) and the author's list of a hundred recommended volumes.

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In her second appearance for EQMM, *Marianne Strong again returns to her roots in the coal mining region of Pennsylvania, where abandoned mine shafts seem to offer a solution to one of the classic obstacles to the perfect murder . . .*

THE SHAFT

by MARIANNE STRONG

I hate red beet soup. I always feel like a vampire when I eat it. Aunt Chesla set a second bowl of the evil stuff in front of me. She knows I hate it, so this was pure spite because I hadn't visited her the last time I came up to Bloomsville from Philly. Normally, I'd refuse a second helping. I figure what I eat is my business, and I have a right to turn down vampire food.

But this time I just stuck my tongue out at Aunt Chesla's back, and then, for my mother's sake, dipped into the soup with its vile slices of blood-red beets. I'd promised Mother I'd be nice to Aunt Chesla.

I don't usually make such promises. But Mother had looked so worried on my last visit that I'd succumbed. "After all," she'd said, "you're not married and you don't have children. When you're old and I'm gone, you'll have only Aunt Chesla to depend on. I don't want you to be lonely in your old age."

It did little good to point out that when I got older Aunt Chesla would be dead too. No one, including Mother, believes that Aunt Chesla will die. Too stubborn. Too horse-strong healthy. So I'd promised to be nice.

That promise suckered me into eating red beet soup and getting mixed up in the ghoulish goings on with Aunt Chesla's neighbor.

Aunt Chesla's neighbor Helen Shiminski is a sad, mousy woman except for the most divine blue grey hair.

Despite living next door to Aunt Chesla, Helen was lonely. Her husband had skipped out on her a while ago. Or so everybody thought. Disappeared without a trace. This wasn't unusual. He'd disappear every now and then to God knows where, and return when

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he was out of money. Home for Walter Shiminski was the place you came back to when you had to.

"So," I asked Aunt Chesla, between loathsome mouthfuls, figuring the faster I ate, the faster it would be gone, "how long has Walter been gone this time?"

"Two months and two days. So that's long enough." Aunt Chesla jerked the dishcloth over the towel rack. It hung precariously, but lacked the nerve to fall.

"Maybe Helen finally poisoned him," I suggested cheerily. I looked up from my soup. "Wait a minute. Long enough for what?"

"Long enough for Helen to forget about him. She has a chance to sell the house now and go to live with her daughter. Margie would love it and so would the grandchildren. But Helen just won't leave that garden. Always out there. Foolish."

"So who did you say wanted to buy the house?" I remembered, but I asked anyway to annoy Aunt Chesla. She doesn't like to repeat herself.

She turned her orangy blond head of permed curls from the stove, looked me in the eye, lifted up the porcelain pot and dipper, and spooned another four dipperfuls of vampire soup into my dish. "The Ginelli family. To open another restaurant, as you perfectly well know."

"Maybe you can sell the Ginelli family your vam— red beet soup recipe."

"Italians do not eat red beet soup, Mary Josephine."

I had in mind to say something insulting like, "No, Italians usually have good food," but I was distracted by Aunt Chesla's calling me Mary Josephine. I hate that name. I go by "Jo," which Aunt Chesla knows very well. I decided to accept defeat on this one, and forge ahead. "Can Helen sell the house without Walter's consent? The law won't consider divorce on grounds of abandonment until he's been gone for seven years."

"Ridiculous," Aunt Chesla declared. "If you count up all the times he's gone off on a drunken spree, he's been missing for ten years."

"Well, it doesn't work that way."

Aunt Chesla threw me a smug look. "Doesn't matter. Helen's folks left her the house in her name alone. They never trusted Walter. Not since the wedding, when the money from the bridal dance disappeared, and the next evening Walter bought drinks for every man in the three saloons on Market Street."

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I swirled my spoon around in the soup and mushed up a few red beets. "Why'd Helen marry Walter, anyway, Aunt Chesla? Good legs?" I asked, hoping to distract her with old gossip. She'd go on for twenty minutes, and then I could claim the soup got cold while I was concentrating on her story. I could jump up, splash the soup back into the pot, and escape through the kitchen door. I'd wave a silver crucifix over the pot for good measure, but I'm not religious enough to carry one. Besides, Aunt Chesla already had a picture of the Virgin Mary, one of those where the Virgin is surrounded by apples and pears and other mysterious fruits, on the wall, right over the stove and the white porcelain pot. Aunt Chesla considers herself religious. She's the one who persuaded Mother to stick me with "Mary," as if "Josephine" wasn't bad enough.

"Helen," Aunt Chesla said, "married Walter because she fell for a nice head of thick brown hair. Very foolish." The orange curls shook in disapproval. "But then, Helen did have Margie and Margie's a wonderful daughter. And now Margie has two wonderful daughters."

"So, maybe Walter was a lousy husband but a decent father," I suggested.

Aunt Chesla snorted and stirred her soup faster. "That devil of a father beat one of Margie's girls a few months ago, and forbade Helen to see the children again. He'll burn in hell."

"The bastard," I said.

"I'll not have that kind of language, Mary Josephine." Aunt Chesla gave me the evil eye, then rattled on. "Margie's wise. She threw out her own lazy husband. Packed one suitcase and put it on the porch. Locked the door. But she could never persuade her mother to do the same with Walter, no matter how much whiskey he poured into himself."

I smirked. My plan was working. In ten minutes, the soup would be stone cold. It took a full thirty seconds for my self-congratulatory smugness to simmer down enough for me to notice that Aunt Chesla had stopped talking. She had turned from the stove to the window above the sink and was peering out of it.

"There they go," she said, her eyes narrowed and disapproving.

"Who?" I said encouragingly.

"Father Kulinski and Dorothy."

"Dorothy?" Despite myself, I was curious. "You mean Dorothy Zadek, that cute little girl with the blond hair and blue eyes?"

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Aunt Chesla looked at me with pity. "This is what comes of staying away from home. Dorothy is nineteen now. And her hair is brown."

"And she's fooling around with Father Kulinski?" This gossip fed my still juvenile rebellion against a strict Catholic upbringing. "Why the little hussy," I said, mocking what I presumed to be the neighborhood's sexist attitudes.

Aunt Chesla shook her curls again. "Dorothy is a very foolish, but a very sweet girl. Father Kulinski is breaking his vows. He should be stripped of his authority. But we can't depend upon the bishop to do it."

I dropped my head over my bowl and recalled why, despite Aunt Chesla's interfering ways, I basically liked the old bat. She's always been a closet feminist, long before Gloria Steinem. I ladled two spoonfuls of tepid soup into my mouth as quick penance for sticking out my tongue earlier. "Uh," I said, lamely trying to restart the gossip, "so Helen won't sell?"

"No," Aunt Chesla said, turning from the window. "And I want you to tell her to sell."

I was about to offer to eat two pots of soup instead, but thought better of it. "If her daughter hasn't been able to persuade her, how can I?"

"She'll listen to someone who lives in a big city and teaches whatever you teach. Helen is impressed by such things. Besides, she really wants to go to Margie's. But she's being stubborn. Just hanging on."

"Maybe Walter's legs are still pretty sexy," I said, hoping to annoy Aunt Chesla for refusing to acknowledge that I teach British history. For Aunt Chesla, only Poland has a history worth mentioning.

Aunt Chesla's look was hot enough to boil soup.

"Okay, okay," I said. "I'll try." I was really beginning to wonder about Walter's prolonged absence. It looked sinister to me. So I agreed to talk with Helen that evening.

Triumphant, Aunt Chesla fell to rummaging through her cupboards for more soup ingredients. The unfortunate recipient this time was to be another neighbor, Mrs. Fronchek, who, according to Aunt Chesla, looked pale and in need of fixing up. With Aunt Chesla's back to me and the stove, I saw my opportunity. I thanked the fates for dumping on Mrs. Fronchek, and poured my soup back into the pot, almost burning myself on the damn stove. The grey and green Sears monstrosity was the last coal stove in town, but

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Aunt Chesla hung on to it and nursed its fire like some hoary old witch with a cauldron that had served her for two thousand years. Despite its treachery in helping to prepare the vampire soup, I hated to leave its earthy warmth to trudge over to Helen's on the first really cool October evening in Bloomsville, so I listened to Aunt Chesla grumble on about Walter Shiminski for another half-hour.

Then, with a rechargeable diehard flashlight in hand, I trudged over to Helen's. I admired the rainbow of stained glass in the front door for the umpteenth time, then banged on the dark wood frame. I didn't have much hope. The one light I could see in the living room looked just dim enough to be a night-light, indicating Helen had retired early, or had gone over to Margie's.

I'm not quite sure why, maybe because of the gleeful, growing, nasty little suspicion that Helen had knocked off Walter, but I decided to snoop around the yard. Actually, the suspicion was giving birth to a new respect for mousy Helen. I like healthy revenge, and she was entitled.

I started round the left side of the house, the side next to Aunt Chesla's. The space between Aunt Chesla's and Helen Shiminski's houses measured about six feet, just wide enough for a sidewalk rimmed by bricks, and just narrow enough for Aunt Chesla to have kept a close ear to Walter's drunken rages.

At the end of the sidewalk I paused, glanced to my right, and directed my flashlight onto Helen's back porch. Through the picket railing, I could see a wooden swing, hung by chains from the porch ceiling. The swing swayed and creaked in the light breeze that blew toward the house and myself. I pulled up the collar of my denim jacket and glanced again at the swing, half expecting to see Helen rise to ask why I had invaded her garden. Then something struck me as wrong. I stared until I remembered. For years, the swing had faced away from Aunt Chesla's house and toward the row of blue spruce the next neighbor had planted years ago for privacy. Now the swing faced forward, towards Helen's own garden. I wondered exactly when Helen had changed the direction of the swing and why.

The end of the sidewalk gave way to a gravel path that led up to the garden about fifteen feet ahead, a round sunken garden about eight feet in diameter, sagging just slightly below the level of the surrounding grass, as if the weight of its bordering stones were too much for the garden to bear.

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The swing swayed again, back toward the house and forward toward the garden. My eyes and flashlight followed the forward arc back to the garden until two white statues swam into my vision. The statues drew me like ghostly figures summoning me to some solemn ceremony.

I walked up to the garden. Pots of chrysanthemums, all purple, sloped down to the center of the sunken ground circling one of the statues.

Again I had the feeling that something was not quite right. I couldn't figure it. The statue was lovely enough. A smiling angel, its hands together and just touching the chin, the head bowed down toward the earth, the wings folded slightly in toward each other as if the seraph, come to perform some heavenly task, had just lighted upon this ground.

My memory kicked into service again. I'd seen this statue before. In fact, several such statues. Up at St. Casimir's cemetery in Bloomsville Heights. One of the local morticians stocked them. They were popular with Bloomsville's widows.

I looked up at the other statue, standing about six feet away, up against some dark cypress. This statue I had seen in Helen's yard before. For years, during my childhood visits to Aunt Chesla, this pure white Virgin Mary had kept an eye on Helen's backyard and on everyone who sat on the bench that Helen used to have where the angel stood now. I frowned. The Virgin must have gotten a little tired of her vigil. She seemed to list to the left.

From behind me came a shuffle and a cough. I swung around, expecting to see Helen descending on me with whatever axe or bludgeon she had used to kill Walter.

Two boys, one about six and the other about nine, stared with wide eyes as if I were the axe murderer.

"Hey," I said, lowering my flashlight. "What are you doing here?"

The six-year-old tried to bolt and run, but tripped over his own feet.

"Geez, Jimmie," the other boy said, and hauled the six-year-old to his feet. "We just came up to see."

"To see what?" I said. "I don't see anything."

The boys' eyes darted behind me in the garden. "We have to go now," the older boy said. "C'mon, Jimmie."

But Jimmie had apparently decided that I was harmless. And also that I was a typical lying adult. "Can I see them?" He opened his brown eyes wider and peeked round me.

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"See what, Jimmie?"

"The monster potatoes."

My eyes got wider.

"Ah, c'mon, Jimmie," the older boy said. "There ain't no monster potatoes. We gotta go before Mom calls."

"You said there was."

I could see that life with Jimmie would not be easy. He'd hold you to your word.

"Monster potatoes?" I said. "Really?"

Jimmie's brother decided to come clean. "Yeah. Some of the other kids said Mrs. Shiminski was growing monster potatoes. That's why she started yelling when we came near the garden."

"When did she start yelling?"

"When we came near the garden."

"Uh, no," I said, "I mean how long ago did she start yelling?"

Jimmie's brother shrugged. "I don't know. A while ago." He raised his shoulders again, rather philosophically. "I don't think there's monster potatoes." He looked expectantly at me.

"What *do* you think?" I asked.

"I think there's people buried there."

"What makes you think that?"

The shrug again. "I don't know. It just looks like there's people buried there. Lots of people. Dead people."

Jimmie let out a howl.

Jimmie's brother looked disgusted. "Ah, geez, Jimmie, you're a baby. We gotta go." Jimmie's brother darted back toward the front of the house, dragging the howling Jimmie behind him.

I sided with Jimmie's brother. No monster potatoes. Dead people. Or, at least, one dead person. With nice hair. I left, heading for Aunt Chesla's with some questions, not the least of which was, if little mousy Helen Shiminski had bashed in Walter's head or shot it off, how had she managed to dig a grave and haul the body out to it.

Naturally, I didn't word my question that bluntly for Aunt Chesla. The old gal is tough, but I didn't want to disillusion her about Helen until I had more evidence than a statue and Jimmie's monster-potato story.

"So, Aunt Chesla," I asked, having warded off the threat of more soup by accepting a cup of tea of some unidentifiable berry taste, "how long has Helen been gardening out back?"

That's when Aunt Chesla dropped the bomb.

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"Since the mine subsidence."

I choked on the tea, to Aunt Chesla's disgust. "Mine subsidence? In Helen's yard?"

"Now, Mary Josephine, don't tell me you didn't know they mined clear under the city streets, and right up to the river banks."

I did know that. No one raised in Bloomsville with a childhood spent sliding down slag heaps and hiding in coal cars on the tracks could have failed to hear an uncle or brother or father tell horror stories of how close to the surface the mining had come. Men mined right under their own houses, knowing the danger, but knowing, too, that their families had to eat. And the coal mines were the only game in town.

"Yeah, Aunt Chesla, I know that. And I know the busiest city government department in town is the Department of Mine Subsidences. But I didn't know Helen's yard had caved in."

"Of course you knew that." Aunt Chesla filled my already full cup of tea to the brim. "Your mother wrote you, I'm sure. Your poor mother. You probably have the letter stuck in some book of yours somewhere."

Aunt Chesla can zero in on someone's sins as accurately as a hound on a fox. And as relentlessly.

"Oh, yeah," I said. "So, when exactly?"

Aunt Chesla drove her x-ray eyes into mine. "If you want to know, Mary Josephine, you just find your mother's letter. Then you can talk to your mother about all the other things she wrote about and let her know that you care enough to read her letters."

"Okay, Aunt Chesla, lighten up, will ya?" I decided to retreat. First, I could see that she wasn't going to tell me a thing. Second, if I stayed longer, I'd probably pop her one on her bulbous nose. Third, I could get more accurate information tomorrow from the Department of Mine Subsidences. Fourth, I was feeling guilty about leaving Mom alone all evening. Especially since I hadn't bothered to write back. But, after all, I knew I was coming for a visit.

So, now I knew that Helen had had a ready-made grave for Walter. Maybe. If the subsidence had occurred just about when Walter had disappeared. But I knew next to nothing about mine subsidences. Just how difficult would it be, I wondered, to toss a dead body down a mine cave-in.

"No problem at all," the assistant mine-subsidence inspector told me cheerily down at the Office of Surface Mining, Subsidence De-

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partment. "If the subsidence is deep enough and wide enough. Some of them are real steep-sided. Some are just nice little dips, couldn't even trap a rabbit. Doesn't even break the grass." He tugged his red and yellow tie down a bit more, and yanked open his white shirt.

I wondered for a moment if he weren't about to display his broad hairy chest to the dame in front of him. I was dead wrong. Beneath the white shirt lay a faded blue T-shirt. I had the feeling the white shirt and hideous tie constituted Bobby Oleck's concession to his hours at a desk job.

And a mighty fine desk it was. A big walnut job, smack in the middle of a large office with floor to ceiling windows in Bloomsville's neo-Baroque courthouse.

"Suppose the subsidence were deep," I asked, hoping Bobby would continue to buy my story about research on a book on Bloomsville, "would the body slide down out of sight?"

"You bet. If the mine shafts were slanted, you'd have a mini-landslide. Rock, soil, sod, everything would run down the shaft, maybe straight into the mine chamber."

"How deep can a subsidence be?"

"Anywhere from five to thirty, forty feet. More sometimes."

"So if a body slid down, likely nobody would spot it."

"Nope." Bobby leaned his barrel chest over his desk. "Nope," he said again, sliding his big jaw from side to side. I think he had his suspicions. "Probably never find the sucker." He sat back. "Have anybody in mind?"

I laughed as innocently as I could. "No, but this is fine material for a good murder mystery."

Bobby's eyes gleamed. "Yeah, I oughta write one. I worked in the mines till the big river break-in. Almost drowned there myself." He looked around the office. "This is my reward for moving faster than the water."

"Why wouldn't anybody find the sucker, Mr. Oleck? Wouldn't somebody on your team spot the body when they came to inspect the cave-in?"

"Nope. Unless they arrived two minutes after the sucker went down. Soil keeps dropping in, covering up the bottom."

"Doesn't anybody go in to inspect the shaft?"

Bobby looked shocked. "Mother of God, 'course not. I can't send men down a mine cave-in. Too damn dangerous. The sides could close in on top of them."

"So what do your men do?"

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"They check for pillars. Use diamond-point drills. Pillars were supposed to be thick. 'Course most of the pillars were stripped down to minimum. Mine owners didn't want valuable anthracite coal rotting away in the ground when they could get good money above for it. Depending on how sturdy the pillars are, we fill in with either a slurry of gravel and sand, or concrete and rock fragments."

"How long would that take?"

"Usually a day or two."

So Helen's backyard could have been Walter's final resting place. I was ready for the key question. "Tell me, Mr. Oleck, could somebody who's not an expert tell if a subsidence will occur soon?"

"Sure. They might. Some of these babies cave in all of a sudden. Some take their time. Drop down a foot a day. Then they might stop, or they might take the plunge all the way. So if you kept your baby blues open, you'd see a possible chance to push the sucker down. Have to get him to the right spot at the right time though." Oleck winked. "Ya know, people say Jimmy Hoffa's part of a New Jersey Turnpike ramp. Not true. He's probably mixed up good with some slurry in a mine shaft right here in Bloomsville." Bobby sounded proud.

"Yeah. Thanks, Mr. Oleck. You've been a big help."

"Good luck," he said, winking again. I had a feeling Mr. Oleck would have a good time telling the boys at the local bar about the dame planning to knock off her husband. "Gonna turn him into slurry," he'd say, his jowls shaking.

I reached the door when Oleck dropped the bomb. "You oughta talk to Margie Shiminski. Her mother had a subsidence about two months ago. A doozy. Dropped down about fifty feet or so."

So, the timing was right. I nodded. "Thanks again, Mr. Oleck."

Oleck consulted his watch. "Margie'll be back from lunch pretty soon."

"Back? Back where?"

Oleck looked surprised. "Here. She's the secretary for the Office of Surface Mining. Does all the paperwork. Probably knows more about subsidences than my field men."

I gulped. "Thanks. I'll talk to her."

The file clerk in Margie's office thought she'd gone over to her mother's house after lunch. I decided to corner Margie at the scene of the crime. See how nervous she got.

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When I arrived, the garden-cemetery looked positively cozy. The sun bathed the angel, lighting up the face that smiled down on Walter. Actually, the smile looked more like a smirk, but that might have been my imagination.

Even the dark cypresses guarding the back border of the garden looked a lighter green.

The blue shutters of Helen's house looked clean and crisp against the white clapboards. The swing's pine boards looked mellow.

And Margie looked pretty. I stared as she came down the back porch stairs and waved to me. Her long brown hair lay softly against the lace collar of her pink blouse. Surely she hadn't shoved her father into a mine. Murderers did not wear lace.

Nevertheless, I gauged how much force it would take to cut down Margie at the knees and felt assured. I could handle it.

"Hello, Jo," Margie said, smiling. "I suppose you've heard about the mine subsidence."

Clever, I thought. Yep, she had done it all right. She was trying to throw me off, allay my suspicions by acting innocent.

"Yeah. Aunt Chesla told me. Must have been quite a shock. Make a lot of noise?"

Margie lifted her shoulders. "I wasn't here."

Yeah, I thought. Tell me another one. "Oh?"

"I'd taken Mother away for a few days. We knew the ground was dropping, and I wanted Mother out of any danger until the subsidence crew could get here."

"Oh. So you and your mother were gone." The woman must have thought I was an airhead. Aunt Chesla could easily knock down that story. She kept a sharp eye on everyone's comings and goings.

"Yes, thanks to your Aunt Chesla."

I stared. "Aunt Chesla?" I repeated, just like an airhead.

"Yeah. She insisted Mother needed to get away and stop worrying about my father. She sent us both up to the inn at Laurel Lake for a few days."

"Laurel Lake?"

"Yes. You know, up at Redrock Mountains. I'm really grateful to Chesla, even though I couldn't stop Mother from worrying." Margie sighed. "Mother's so difficult. She brooded all week. Sometimes she actually seemed angry with Chesla for sending her away. I don't know why."

I was afraid I did.

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Margie looked at her watch. "I'd better get back to the office. I hope I'll see you before you head back to Philadelphia." She turned away and then turned back. "I'm sorry. Had you come over to see Mother? I just stopped to pick up a dress for her. She's at my place for a few days." Margie sighed again. "She refuses to come for more than a few days at a time. I think she's still brooding about Father."

Yeah, I thought. I'll bet. "Only natural," I said aloud.

"Well, 'bye."

I heaved a sigh, letting the air out of my head. Okay, I thought, but how the hell did she get him out there? On the right spot at the right time, as Oleck had put it.

I stared at the garden, willing Walter to send up some message from the deep. It seemed ridiculous, in the bright sun, to think of Walter sprawled at the bottom of a mine shaft fifty feet below me.

I looked up at the listing Virgin for an answer. I got one. After all, my name is Mary.

One of Mary's toes sparkled in the sun.

I walked around the garden cemetery to the Virgin.

She tilted easily in my hands. She didn't weigh much and she was hollow.

I reached in and pulled out a bottle. Jack Daniel's. Top of the line. Full.

So that's how she did it. Walter would have walked a thousand miles for his liquor. But he didn't have to. His nemesis would have made it easy for him to discover the first bottle. Just a matter of digging that little trench in the soil so that the neck of the bottle would stick out from the hollow base of the statue, straight out from beneath the head of the wicked serpent crushed by the virgin's foot. The serpent offered the temptation. Nice touch. That Jack Daniel's neck with its slightly bulbous shape and its fluted ridges would have thrown a sun-reflected light right into Walter's eyes as he took his nap on the bench. He was too inebriated most of the time to wonder what benefactor stuck the whiskey into the virgin on a regular basis. He would have just plopped down and wiled away the day drinking until he dropped. Only the last time, he dropped straight down the mine shaft. Must have been sobering.

I tucked the bottle back into the statue. She must have forgotten she'd put two bottles in. At least Walter had gone straight to hell with the comfort of one of the bottles.

I knew I'd be better off not knowing, but I could never walk away until a task was done.

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I marched over to Aunt Chesla's, slipped into the side door and down into the cellar.

It took me seven minutes of rummaging through three walls of shelves before I found them. Five bottles of Jack Daniel's, behind three rows of the canned plums.

I reached up and took down a bottle. Aunt Chesla had sure used Walter's sins against him. And she'd nicely sidestepped Helen's weakness, too. Persuaded her to get out of town while the deed was done. The only thing Aunt Chesla hadn't counted on was guilt. Not any of her own, of course. Helen's. Helen would tend Walter's grave till doomsday. Or until Aunt Chesla bullied her into selling the house and giving half the proceeds to a battered-women's home. In Walter's name.

I sighed and replaced the bottle on the shelf. After all, a bottle in a statue proved nothing.

"Is that you down there, Mary Jo?" Aunt Chesla's voice rattled a few jars.

"Uh, yeah," I said, figuring I was safe from the wrath of womankind's protectress. I'd never beaten up on anybody.

"Well, bring up some canned peaches. Peaches, not plums, you hear? I'm going to send some to Father Kulinski."

Mother of God and all the saints, I thought. I hoped Father Kulinski had all his affairs in order.

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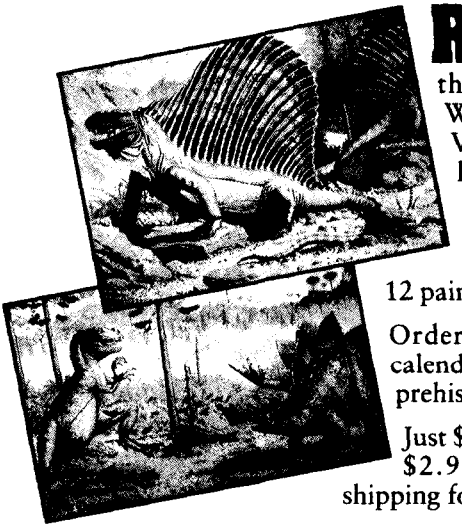

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a *NEW* short story by

JO BANNISTER

EQMM *extends hearty congratulations to Jo Bannister on the recent nomination of her story "Howler" for the 1992 Edgar Allan Poe Award for best short story. "Howler" also placed second, many of our regular readers will remember, in the 1992 EQMM Readers Award competition. Here Ms. Bannister is with her first story of 1993, a tale we hope will bring her equal success. . . .*

FACE VALUE

by JO BANNISTER

There's a major snag with being an artist in this green and pleasant land. It isn't the weather, though for much of the year watercolourists have to work with more water and less colour than they'd wish. It isn't the amateur critics who cluck over your shoulder as you paint. It isn't even galleries that pocket half the proceeds if, despite minimal promotion and a sales assistant who wouldn't know a good painting if it bit her on the bum, somebody wanders in off the street and buys one.

No, the real snag is that paintings only start fetching serious money after the artist is dead. The galleries, the agents, and the art spectators all make a killing then, but it's too late for the poor sod who recycled tea bags so he could afford the paint.

You've guessed my little secret, I see. I am indeed one of that happy band—we few, we impoverished few—the Working Artists of Britain, those who ignored the advice and gave up our day jobs. And yes, you're right about the other thing too: I am a bit of a cynic. I can't think how you guessed.

Don't misunderstand me, I wouldn't do anything else. Actually, I can't do anything else. When I cook everything goes hard except the

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toast. When I type the keys jam together, all except the j, which repeats itself maniacally across the page. When I go shopping I end up with three jars of peanut butter and no bread. But I can paint. I know I can paint. I know that the money I earn bears no relation to the quality of my work. One day someone other than me will recognise this. That's why I keep flogging a horse that to everyone else appears to be dead.

That, and because there's nothing to beat the thrill of someone paying to possess something you produced out of the depths of your soul. A couple of pounds for the paint, rather more for the canvas, something for turps and linseed and the wear-and-tear on your brushes: the face value of an oil painting might be about twenty quid. The difference between that and the cheque he writes is the purchaser's tribute to your talent. He likes what you do enough to pay hard-earned money for it. Think of the best compliment you ever had and multiply it by ten: that's how it feels to sell a painting.

Now imagine how it feels when somebody likes your work enough to buy one painting after another.

At first I thought the gallery had made a mistake, listed the same sale twice. It's not the sort of mistake they usually make, but there's a first time for everything. I phoned them to check. They had yet more amazing news for me. Not only had he bought "Nocturne" and "Aubade" in the first week of the exhibition, he'd been back to buy "Aurora" as well. One might have been a whim; two was some kind of a statement; three was a collection. An invisible pianist played scales up and down my spine. Was this it—the beginnings of success?

"Who is he?"

The proprietor checked her records. "Earl Myrthyn." She spelled it out. "Not a regular, it was the first time he'd bought from us."

It was an un-English-sounding name. "An American?" But she didn't know. All she could tell me about him was that his cheques were good.

The doorbell rang and it was Jamie Barr. He had a key, but hadn't yet got in the way of using it. We were at that stage, still being careful of one another's space. Things were quite new between us. But good: I'd have staked my life on that.

Jamie was fascinated by the fact that I didn't know and would probably never know the man who was buying my work. "We don't need to know one another," I explained. "Do you know who built your car? All you care is that he knew his job. And in fact, you can't

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know that, so you look at the badge on the front and it's a good one, so you take it on trust that the mechanic was good too. Mr. Myrthyn doesn't have to take anything on trust. He can look at the canvas and see I'm a good painter."

"What if he wants to buy more?"

"From your mouth to God's ear," I prayed. "Then he'll ask at the gallery and they'll ask me for some new canvases. But I still won't meet him. If he likes what he sees, the first I'll know is that I'll get a cheque."

Encouraged by Mr. Myrthyn's interest, I worked hard, finishing a canvas about once a week. The gallery, also encouraged by Mr. Myrthyn, took them all and sold them all. Mr. Myrthyn bought two more; then someone else bought a couple; then a couple of people bought one each; then Mr. Myrthyn bought another.

Much of the time Jamie sat with me while I worked, making coffee, bringing in pizza. For himself he was unconvinced of the dignity of labour. There was some family money, and he wasn't above the odd week of what he called "helping a friend"—anything from manning a market barrow to flying the Concorde with urgent papers in his hand luggage. He had enough to keep body, soul, and Porsche together.

Perhaps because he was the first man in my life to see that painting could be more than just a hobby, Jamie was the first to show more than a passing interest in what I did. That was nice, because quite honestly I'd been working too hard to put much into our relationship. He could have been forgiven for finding better things to do with his time.

He was indignant at the disparity between the prices my work commanded and those given for slight works by little-known nineteenth-century artists. Not the important paintings of the period, but the family groups and farmyard studies and Sir William on His Favourite Hunter that kept many a jobbing artist in business before the invention of the Box Brownie. They weren't good. Some of them—the square pigs, the pinheaded racehorses—weren't even competent. But they've become valuable. Like many a starving artist before him, Jamie wanted to know why.

The answer is that the people who painted them are safely dead. They're not adding to their output year by year, devaluing the currency by painting more and more notes. The body of an artist's work is finite: however unexceptional his talent, once he's dead people with even a modest interest in him have to compete. Prices start to

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rise, and then people who had no interest in the live painter begin to sit up. So even an unimpressive artist is worth more dead than alive.

When the artist is good, his death prompts an early reassessment of his work and the cash tills start ringing up phone numbers before the moss has grown on his tombstone.

When Mr. Myrthyn bought three of my paintings in a month, the gallery revalued the rest of my canvases upwards, and Jamie prised the brush from my hand and said it was time I took a break. Reluctantly—I was beginning to think of a week's work in monetary terms—I agreed. I had in mind a long weekend in the Lake District and thought I'd pack my sketchpad.

Jamie booked us on an Adventure Fortnight in the Greek Islands, and he did the packing.

I fell off the sailboard and, despite Jamie's efforts to extricate me, became trapped under the sail and nearly drowned. For pony trekking, I was mounted on something distantly related to Red Rum which ran away with me halfway down a rocky gorge and dumped me on my head at the bottom. The hang-gliding instructor was a drunk. After three days I'd shaved death more closely, and in more different ways, than Baron Munchausen.

"I don't know about this place," I confided to Jamie when we were alone. "They don't seem very safety conscious."

He smiled tolerantly. "The best riders fall off sometimes. And nobody ever learned to windsurf without getting wet."

"And the hang-gliding expert with the straw to his inside pocket?"

"Not the highest standard of professionalism," he admitted. "We'll give the hang gliding a miss in future." His face brightened. "We're scuba diving tomorrow."

My heart sank. It seemed to me that the scope of disaster was greater three fathoms beneath the Aegean than anywhere we'd yet been. The tanks might be empty. The air hoses might leak. We could be given irregular regulators, or weight belts that would take us plummeting to the bottom. The instructor might succumb to an attack of nitrogen narcosis and lead us merrily deeper and deeper until returning to the surface would precipitate a fatal attack of the bends.

Jamie chuckled. "Don't worry. I've been diving since I was knee-high to an octopus. I'll look after you."

That evening we ran out of toothpaste. I thought Jamie might have packed some more and called after him but he was already

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en route to the bar. There wasn't any toothpaste in his sponge-bag so I looked in his suitcase.

What I found there drove all thoughts of dental hygiene from my mind. It was a letter: a letter from a woman, on palest mauve notepaper scented just perceptibly with lilacs.

Did I read it? Of course I read it. And take that censorious little frown off your face—you'd have read it too.

Halfway through, my anger subsiding, I realised I'd made a mistake. It was wholly innocuous, a letter any man could receive with a clear conscience, though it was affectionate, even loving, full of shared intimacies and private jokes. It was from his mother. She had news of his dog and his sister, in that order. She'd had the paintings off the wall to redecorate the library, and now she couldn't remember what went where. She hoped he'd write and say if the Aegean was as lovely as she remembered; she hadn't been back since his father died.

It was a nice letter. I thought I'd like Jamie's mother. But I thought it was odd that she didn't mention me, not even in that cool tone mothers use when their children are engaged in activities than which they are old enough to know better. He might have been in the Greek Islands on his own.

I put it back in the envelope. The stationery was crisp and textured, with a discreet little seal stamped on the back of the envelope. I turned it to the light in order to read the impress. Then, very carefully, I put it back where I found it.

Early next morning, before Jamie woke, I made my way to the stables. The trek leader remembered me. "How's your head?"

I smiled. "Fine. It was a bit of a lark, that's all."

He was an Australian called Pete. He looked relieved. "That's what Jamie said. 'Course, he also said you were an expert rider and you liked a challenge. I wouldn't have put you on Xerxes otherwise. He overstated the case a bit, didn't he?"

That was putting it mildly. I had three lessons when I was twelve. Jamie knew that.

I went looking for Dmitri the hang-gliding instructor, but he'd been sacked and a maid was cleaning his chalet. She was distinctly frosty with me and it took me some time, using basic English and hand signals, to discover why. It transpired that she was sweet on Dmitri and blamed Jamie for getting him dismissed. It was true that he used to drink, but not since he got this job: not till Jamie

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introduced him to scotch. It was a terrible thing to do. Somebody could have been killed.

My last call was to the beach hut where a large hearty Irishman was laying out the subaqua equipment. I introduced myself, said I was down for a lesson with him later in the day.

Patrick nodded, grinning broadly. "Your friend said you were nervous. He said the only way you'd have a go was if he rigged your equipment and showed you what to do. Mind, I made sure first that he knew what he was doing."

I returned his smile numbly. Oh yes, Jamie knew what he was doing.

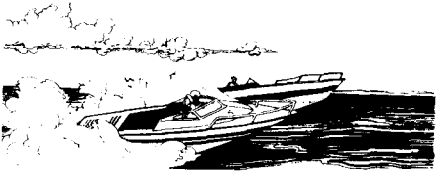
Not that I could prove it. There was no point telling the police. I collected my things from upstairs while he was in the bathroom and was on the airport bus before he missed me.

I took all our money, hoping to slow him down, and the letter from his suitcase. The one from his mother, the Countess of Myrthyn. Jamie Barr was his real name, but the death of his father had left him with a title. The Earl of Myrthyn. It was he who'd been buying my paintings as if there was no tomorrow.

I left a letter in its place. I told him I knew his game: that recognising my talent, he'd encouraged me to produce a body of good work, then brought me here to meet with the tragic accident that would start his investment appreciating.

I told him I'd lodge an account of what he'd done and tried to do with someone he didn't know and would never find. If anything unexpected happened to me—an improbable accident or motiveless crime—before the earth had settled over my bones he'd read my story in a major national publication. Of course he'd deny it. But after that he wouldn't dare sell a painting of mine, however valuable they became.

I ended the letter with the words, "This is not a bluff." It remains to be seen if he'll believe me.



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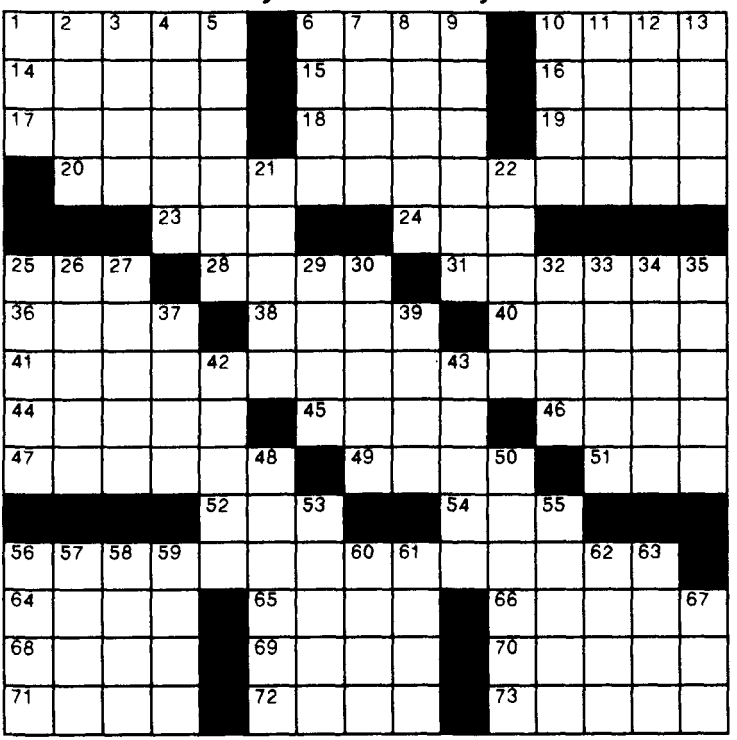
THE MYSTERY CROSSWORD

by Ruth Minary



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ACROSS

1 *Time and Time* ——, B.M. Gill
6 Disreputable bar
10 Top
14 Historic city in NW Switzerland, old form
15 Periods
16 To, It.
17 Mary ——, star in *The Maltese Falcon,* 1941
18 Fluff
19 Fissure
20 Take the body?
23 A-U connection
24 Ike's Command
25 Aves.' cousins
28 Sprinkle
31 Respect
36 Comedian Johnson
38 Withered

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40 Old Italian money
41 Uncommon sleuth? (20 and 56 across)
44 Avoid
45 Slayer of wife Emilia
46 Trigonometric function
47 Serious
49 Solicit
51 Kind of curve
52 French island
54 *Physical Evidence*'s actor Beatty
56 Murder?
64 Kind of customer
65 Hamlet, e.g.
66 Attempts
68 "Edie" in *Peter Gunn* series
69 Serf
70 Employs
71 Soon
72 Antelope's playmate
73 Maigret's school

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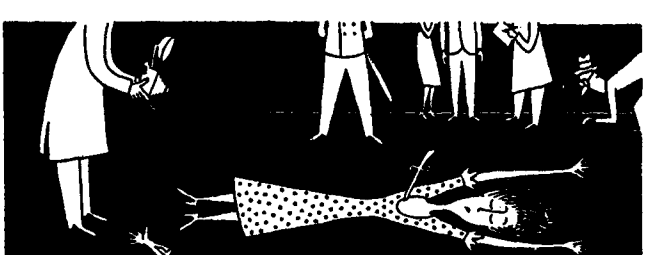
1 Perry's and Ham's grp.
2 Lovejoy's creator
3 Incorrigible terrier
4 —— *a Mystery,* radio serial
5 Achilles' mother was one
6 Sandwich place
7 Spring flower
8 Van Dine's Philo
9 Landed property
10 Bois-de-Boulogne, for one
11 A.K.A. Lamb
12 Landon and TV alien
13 Gideon's wife
21 *Peril at End* ——, Christie
22 Leo ——, cop in *Relentless*
25 After Christmas events
26 Treasure ——
27 Valuable fiddle
29 19th Dynasty Pharaoh
30 Negotiate
32 Garfield and his ilk
33 Famous bovine
34 Utopias
35 Mystery lady Patricia
37 Norse epic
39 Hence
42 Kind of jury
43 Sometimes fatal
48 Dodged
50 Babies do this
53 Expunge
55 Ancient Persian gold coin
56 Calif. inst. of learning
57 *The Last Camel Died at* ——, E. Peters
58 —— contendere
59 Bates or King
60 Ms. Perry of mystery
61 Lecher's look
62 Amateur, var.
63 Contemptible person
67 London from Leeds



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Born in Brussels, Julio Cortázar lived in Argentina most of his life, teaching at the university in the years before Perón came to power and later establishing himself as a leading writer of short fiction and novels whose often experimental work involved a play, he said, "between reality and fantasy." The author's short story "Blow-up" was made into a movie directed by Antonioni; his novel Hopscotch *won the National Book Award in 1967 for best work in translation. Writer Donald Yates, a professor of Spanish literature until his recent retirement, has translated for us here a perfect example of Cortázar's art . . .*

CONTINUATION OF THE PARKS

by JULIO CORTÁZAR

He had begun reading the novel a few days before. He set it aside because of pressing business demands, and took it up again on the train ride back to his country estate; slowly he let himself become interested in the plot and characters. That afternoon, after writing a letter to his attorney and discussing with his ranch foreman a matter related to legacies, be returned to the book in the tranquility of his study, which faced on the oak park. Settled comfortably into his favorite chair, his back to the door that would have distracted him as the potential source of intrusion, he gave his left hand up to idle stroking of the green velvet as he started in on the final chapters. His mind effortlessly retained the names and the physical appearances of the protagonists: the novelistic illusion conquered him almost immediately. He relished the almost perverse pleasure of releasing himself, line by line, from his surroundings and sensing at the same time that his head was resting comfortably against the velvet of the chair's high back, that the cigarettes were within easy reach, that beyond the broad windows the air of the gathering dusk danced beneath the oaks. Word by word, absorbed by the sordid dilemma of the characters, allowing himself to approach the images that began to harmonize and acquire color and

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movement, he became witness to the last encounter at the mountain lodge. First the woman entered, fearfully; now the lover arrived, his face scratched by the lash of a branch. Admirably, she stanched the blood with her kisses, but he rejected her caresses; he had not come to repeat the rituals of a secret passion that was sheltered by countless dried leaves and furtive paths. The dagger grew warm at his breast, and beneath it throbbed his crouching freedom. A gasping dialogue coursed over the pages like a stream of serpents, and the reader sensed that everything had been decided from the outset. Even those caresses that entangled the body of the lover, as if to retain him and dissuade him, abominably traced the form of another body that had to be destroyed. Nothing had been overlooked: alibis, hazards, possible mischances. From that moment on, each instant had its meticulously designated use. Their merciless review was scarcely interrupted by a hand stroking a cheek. It was growing dark.

Now, without looking at each other, rigidly bound to the task that awaited them, they separated at the door of the lodge. She was to follow the path that led to the north. From the opposite trail he turned back to see her running off, her hair loosened and flowing. Then he too ran, taking cover behind trees and hedges, until he distinguished through the gentle mist of dusk the tree-lined walk that led to the house. The dogs were not supposed to bark and they did not bark. The foreman would not be about at that hour and he was not. He went up the three steps to the porch and then entered the house. Over the sound of blood pounding in his ears there came the words of the woman: first a blue room, then a hallway, a carpeted stairway. Upstairs, two doors. No one beyond the first one, nor the second. The door of the drawing room, and then the dagger in his hand, the light of the two large windows, the tall back of a green velvet-covered chair, the head of the man seated in the chair reading a novel.

—translated by Donald A. Yates

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Edward Clinton is a rather unusual candidate for inclusion in EQMM*'s department of first stories, as he has already authored six published plays, several episodes for television dramas and situation comedies, and a film,* Honky Tonk Freeway, *which starred Jessica Tandy, Hume Cronyn, and Geraldine Page. This is, nevertheless, his first published story, inspired by a recent holiday overseas. . . .*

NO VIVALDI

by EDWARD CLINTON

Now there would be no Vivaldi, she thought as she picked up the black box from its delicate position on the stone cold floor. And she was right: the little battery sucking monster was dead or just nearly. All it could do now was to fit and start its way through "The Four Seasons." The same thing with Michael Bolton, where it jumped up and down on "Soul Provider" till she poked it into the off position and almost threw the thing across the room, but she didn't because she was a hopeful person, and she was hoping, almost desperately, that given the adequate time to rest, the black electronic handful might once again regain its wits. So she set it down reverently on the rented shelf, halfway between the pound block of creamery butter and the extremely large loaf.

Almost immediately, she was eyeing the loaf. Food for a giant, she thought, which is what I'll become if I keep this up. She stared at the loaf for a moment too long, and before she could even consider restraining herself, she was already sawing through it with great relish, quickly slathering on the soft butter in great creamy waves. Then one-two-three and it was gone. Simple as that.

"Naughty me," she declared to the empty room, "I'm actually having fun, and without a man. Naughty me," she reaffirmed, swip-

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ing a smear of butter from her lip with a flick of her tongue before she had to censure herself for talking aloud to an empty room. That's the sign of a lonely person and I am not lonely, she thought silently.

She snatched up her last newspaper (they were so expensive here) from its place by the fire and dropped her great bulk down into the cheap chair and commenced to scan for articles, adverts, anything to help, hoping that she might get lucky again and find one as good as the last. Even the memory of it made her chuckle out loud: "For Sale Six Bridesmaid's Dresses, Turquoise, Size 18, No Reasonable Offer Rejected."

That she could definitely use. Quite craftable into a "Lady Ducky" story. Focus on Glenda Goose attempting to foist off large bridesmaid's dresses on Salina Swan and her elegant sister, Salome.

Where were they for crying out loud?

She tried to calm herself so she wouldn't start hyperventilating again. She forced herself to focus on the newspaper, hoping to at least keep it from shaking in her hands. The effort was flawed, but then she saw a good one! She deftly scissored up a row of newsprint with her long surgical scissors, then, turn, turn, turn and the ad was out. Perfect. Simply divine.

"Separated Persons Association Weekly Social Event, Wednesday, Office Bar—8:00 P.M., Genuine Persons Only"

Yes. She would send Draheebus Donkey (long divorced) clumping into the barn for the weekly social of separated animals, worrying all the while if he was genuine enough.

Her eyes found their way around the room back to the half violated loaf, but this time she felt able to restrain herself. Kay McCord considered herself very good at control, at least until quite recently.

(That beer bottle had come nowhere near his head. After a year and a half, he didn't want to hear about *commitment!* Or even discuss it! But that had all happened over six months ago. She had come here to get away.)

If that damned black and white cat had not shown up, she never would have become involved. But Cantankerous Cat was one of her best holiday discoveries—sitting high up on the garden wall opposite her Castle Mews Cottage. Always right next to the bright blue garden gate, even in the rain or early morning dew. He sat up there majestically cloaked in a cape of crystal beads. Diamonds dripping from his long white whiskers.

He had walked her right past the bloody newspaper.

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The travel books warn: "Do not get into an altercation with a local. If arrested, call the U.S. Embassy if you are allowed to make a call."

You dial "999" here, not "911."

BANG! BANG! BANG! went the Mews Cottage door. "Garda," a rough voice called out. The word didn't sound the way it was spelled. She had seen it spelled plenty of times in her various newspapers. It was pronounced "Gardeeee." Like a refrain from a nursery rhyme to her ear: *"Diddle-dee-dum gardeeee. Diddle-dee-dum gardaa."*

When she unbolted the door and saw two little police cars and three policemen standing in the totally black night, all childlike thoughts vanished.

"The ambulances are coming. They've got a much longer way than us," the small man in charge said with a heavy accent as they all brushed past her—their eyes all over the room.

"Upstairs," she said in a dull, drained, almost drunken voice.

"Go ahead," the one in charge said right off, and the other two tramped up the tiny, winding, "Mother Hubbard" staircase, sounding more like four men than two. She pulled her flimsy robe close against her skin because of the chill and sat down by the peat fire, staring into it fixedly as if the answer might appear in the flames. She had never been able to sleep for days before a flight. Now this.

She needed energy and she looked briefly at the loaf on the cutting board. The eyes of the man in charge followed hers. "On holidays, are we?" the little leader asked, looking at her bags all packed and ready for the return flight home. She did not respond. It didn't seem to matter. He walked slowly around the room till he stopped over by the bread board. "Who murdered the loaf?" he asked blandly, poking at the hacked up loaf of bread. The room began to blur a bit as she brought her attention away from the fire and up to his face. She was going to have to answer questions sooner or later. But then, as she stared at his face, she set about assigning an animal to him, something she always did upon first meeting a person. Aardvark, she thought, and was pleased. She had never had an aardvark before. The other two could be Brendan Bear and Mr. Macaw. (Kids would like that.) Then she noticed how awfully silent the two upstairs were. What must they be thinking?

An ambulance decorated by a neon orange stripe slipped subtly into the courtyard, dousing its lights. No one emerged.

"Come on, luv, let's have a bit of chat, then," Aardvark prompted, appearing to be nice. "The pub up the great hill have anything to

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do with this?" he enquired, as if pubs held the answer to every crime.

Another darkened ambulance squeezed its way silently into the tiny Mews Courtyard, crunching the gravel. Again no one emerged. She remembered, from her American crime programs, that ambulance crews are not allowed into a crime scene until it has been made safe.

"What do you use these for?" Aardvark asked, pausing in his endless circle of the room long enough to hold up the pair of surgical scissors.

She knew she had better say *something*. "Clippings."

"Any particular kind of clippings? The keenest price on a tin of pears perhaps?"

Mean, sarcastic little aardvark, she thought. That was men for you—can't figure something out and they get mean right off. "Ideas for stories. I write childrens' stories," she said.

"*Childrens'* stories, it is then?" he said dismissively as people, especially men, often did. "You want to tell us what happened here tonight?" he asked as he dropped the scissors into a zippered plastic bag he had produced from nowhere. It already contained the bread knife. "I have to tell you that what you say from now on will be taken down and used against you at your trial, if there is a trial, of course." Now he had a small pad in hand and was scratching notes. He spoke as he wrote. She hated people who spoke as they wrote. "Are we sure we weren't up the great hill in the pub drinking; and it made us crazy enough to do a thing like what has occurred here tonight?"

"I don't know what happened. I had nothing to do with it. I only found him. That's all." Strangely, her eye kept coming back to that loaf. It *did* look murdered—he was right. She wasn't used to cutting her own bread and had made quite the mess of it. "I had dinner at the pub. It's the only place in town. When I returned home I heard the cat calling out in the wind. It was a terrible night . . ."

"Fierce night, yes, Ma'am."

"I thought the cat might be hurt, so I went out into the wind with my flashlight. It was raining then as well. What with the wind and the rain, I couldn't hear anything, but I saw the black and white cat go up that horrible steep hill in the abandoned garden."

"And you followed?"

"I followed. It was treacherous—getting up that slippery garden hill in the rain and all."

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He laughed comfortingly. "Oh, that hill is quite a famous one around here. People don't quickly forget that hill. I'm surprised you made it up at all, but you must have, since you know it was once a garden. And since ya found him up there, of course."

"Terrible place for a garden. But it's a flower garden so maybe it doesn't make any difference. I did find him there; it might have been his cries I heard and not the cat. Did I say I'd found him there when I placed the call?"

"I believe so."

"It makes no difference."

"It all makes a difference, dear. When a woman, a foreigner, goes out in the pitch of night, up a hill that's nearly a small mountain, in the fiercest rain I've seen in years, with a wind that could blow ya down, gale force, gale force it was, and finds a body, when all she was doing was chasing a cat . . . It all makes a difference, dear. Is the pub where you made your call from?"

"No, I went out of the courtyard to the street and used the call box."

"After he died?"

"I guess it was after he died. I'm not clear now. It's all . . ."

"Now then, did ya have a drink at the pub with your dinner tonight?"

"One."

"One or maybe a few?"

"A few, I guess. I wasn't drunk or anything."

"Ah, a few. The famous 'few.' You'll excuse me, I run into that phrase quite frequently in my line of work."

"Choooeee," came the call from upstairs. Apparently Aardvark's name was Joe. "Choooeeee, best ta cum up ere." And up Joe scurried.

At the very top of the stairs, they spoke in their ancient way—a low, tumbling, under-the-sea language that sounded like wet stones being turned in a barrel, getting polished.

Before she knew it, Joe was back down, asking what she'd done to the "little man." "Put him out in a storm till he died?" Since the cop was also a little man, and in her experience, she knew that little men were the most dangerous, she kept silent. "You'll have to come with us now," he said sternly, gathering up her few things to take along.

Dumbly, she blurted. "But I can't go with you, I have a plane to catch," and gestured over at the suitcases with the tickets and passport resting efficiently on top. He had already taken her passport

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and slid it into one of his great blue uniform pockets.

"I had nothing to do with it. I only found him, like I said when I called." He said nothing at all.

Mr. Macaw carried the tiny body out, but she wasn't really looking. She stared down at the blood on her robe. "Can I change out of this?" she asked as if she had only just noticed. "I need to get decent."

"Ah, we'll get ya decent," he said, barely able to hide his disgust.

Soon after one ambulance pulled away, they loaded her into the other. Inside, a woman wearing a habit hovered over her, peering, questioning. Kay guessed her to be a nun or a nurse or both. The winged habit made it appear that there was a seagull about to take off from the top of her head, which set Kay's mind to creating a story about a seagull who nested on people's heads and gave them bright ideas. "Do you have anything to tell me, dear," the Sister asked. She wondered why they all called her "dear" and if they would let her telephone the American Embassy. Yet, in her mind, she could picture the appropriate passage from her travel book: "Do not expect our embassy to apply any pressure to suppress local laws. . . . The embassy can and will provide the names of local lawyers during the course of normal business hours in the host country." What time is it, she wondered, and concluded it must be about three in the morning.

At the hospital, she explained to the aardvark how it was that she came to be all cut up, "I fell getting him down that damned garden hill. I cut my ankles on the briars."

"Yeeees," the little man said, somehow giving it four syllables and managing to sound like the tide coming in. "On the yellow furze bushes ya cut yourself, ya say? They grow everywhere without restraint but we tolerate it because it's natural. Now then, ya *did* manage to get him down because you're a big girl, I guess. Almost bigger than me." And he laughed derisively. "It's all that bread and butter. Those loaves you've managed to murder," he said, still laughing while a young cop wrote down every word. He, too, had a smirk on his face. She would have liked to wipe the smirks off both of their faces. "Question is—what happened up there on that hill? Did ya have a change of heart? Isn't that it? Couldn't leave him there after all? So ya went back and brought him down the hill? Tried to help him. Tried to save him, but it was too late. Isn't that how it happened?"

"I had nothing to do with him. I heard a wail in the wind. I thought it might be this cat I had come to know while staying at the Mews

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Cottage. He sits on the garden gate. I thought he might have been hurt out there. So I went out to look. That's when I found him. There was a newspaper by him. He looked newborn. I dropped my flashlight. It went out and I couldn't find it again."

Aardvark took a different tack. "Newspapers are quite expensive in this country, and you bought *all* of yours *just to make clippings?"* She did not respond. He didn't seem to notice. "You are correct; there *was* a newspaper found up the garden hill where you say the body was. We have also found a torch. Just like you say. But the odd thing about this newspaper found at the scene is that it has a clipping out of it. Right now we're going through the clippings in your bag to see if we can match it up. Quite a hobby you have. No rhyme nor reason to it we can see, but the scissors would have come in handy all by yourself there. Just clip-clip-clip. Isn't that it? I don't suppose it's possible that one of the clippings from your bag would match up with the missing one from the bloody newspaper?"

Her cheeks were red with anger but she restrained herself from commenting. She had said more than enough. Too much. "Don't you have *anything* to say now, luv?" he asked. The rolling "ting" in his pronunciation of "anything" made her think of the little silver bell on the garden gate. *Ting-a-ling,* then later on again, *ting-a-ling.* She'd almost forgotten it; she'd been napping by the peat fire and it had barely registered. But in between the *ting-a-lings* there were words in the wind—words she couldn't make out. More than one person. That was for sure. Then a woman shouting, cursing a man's name up to God. Then a final *ting-a-ling,* and there was silence, except for the wind, until she was thoroughly awakened by the cries.

Little Aardvark was going on and on; "I always say," he was saying as he circled the room, lecturing, "that in a homicide, and this *is* definitely a homicide, if you don't catch your killer in the first twelve hours, or within twelve miles of the scene of the crime, or if your killer is not among the first twelve people you question, then you'll never catch your killer. What do you say to that?"

"I say you've got eleven more to go," she snapped. She tried to tell him about the voices. "There were words—a fight, a terrible fight. The man left her, slamming the gate and cursing . . . in your language." She thought this detail would please the little man. It did not. In fact, it had the opposite effect. She went rolling right on. "Then a woman's voice called out, cursing the man's name."

"And what was the name?"

"Liam or Lem, or Tem, Den, something like that."

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"Ah, yes, so you don't recall."

"I was napping, and then the baby shrieked."

"Perhaps the gate was blowing in the wind, dear."

"I heard what I heard. Then the cat went up the garden hill and I followed with my flashlight."

Little Aardvark was pacing now. "Just tell me it was yours. That's all. And we'll be done here," he said in a quiet, soothing, smooth tone as slick as a shot of whiskey.

She shook her head frantically. For a flash she imagined never seeing America again. "A man and a woman were arguing in the garden, then—*ting-a-ling*—and they were gone."

Aardvark wasn't listening. "I'm gonna ask ya again," he said. "Is the infant yours?"

She cried and hugged herself. "I write childrens' stories . . ."

But the little leader left in the middle of her sentence and the doctor, a man with calloused hands, appeared. He looked more like a farmer than a doctor and was soon all over her, prodding her inside and out.

Shortly after that, it all stopped, and within minutes, she was on her way to the airport with a police escort no less; Aardvark, in the front seat, silently staring at her from time to time as if she were a rare bird or something. No one spoke.

"Sorry," Aardvark said, much later, as they tramped through the tube leading to the plane. She wondered if he was going to escort her all the way to her seat, but he stopped short and finished what he had to say. "About our little misunderstandings, ya know."

It all made her too angry. It had been worse than a bad dream. She felt raped. "Your little misunderstanding?" she almost screamed at him. "Do you honestly think I'd take a holiday—to do something like *this?* You cannot simply—"

He was looking down at the red industrial carpeting. "Well, we had to be certain, didn't we? Anyway, I have eleven more to go before I catch my killer. And they're holding your plane for you. So—Ta."

In her seat, during the trauma of take-off, with babies crying and the landing gear groaning up into the underbelly of the craft, Kay was more calm than usual. The woman in the next seat ostentatiously rattled her newspaper.

"Cluck, cluck, cluck," the woman gurgled from deep within her soft fleshy throat. That was good, Kay thought. She could be a dove,

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a clucking dove. Children would like the idea of a clucking dove, reading a newspaper on an airplane.

"Bluudy men in my country," the woman commented as she read. "Prevent a pregnant girl from leaving the country! They won't be satisfied till girls are dropping them in dust bins and dark back alleys."

"Or in darkened gardens in the middle of the night," Kay mumbled quietly. The woman seemed not to hear.

After an appropriate length of time, the clucking dove folded her newspaper and asked in a most conversational tone, "Have a nice holiday in our little country, then, did ya?"

"Nice place to visit," Kay remarked, pulling on her earphones and poking her CD player.

It was only then she remembered that there would be no Vivaldi.

SOLUTION TO THE MYSTERY CROSSWORD

A	G	A	I	N	■	D	I	V	E	■	P	E	A	K
B	A	S	L	E	■	E	R	A	S	■	A	L	L	A
A	S	T	O	R	■	L	I	N	T	■	R	I	F	T
■	H	A	V	E	H	I	S	C	A	R	C	A	S	E
■	■	■	E	I	O	■	■	E	T	O	■	■	■	■
S	T	S	■	D	U	S	T	■	E	S	T	E	E	M
A	R	T	E	■	S	E	R	E	■	S	O	L	D	O
L	O	R	D	P	E	T	E	R	W	I	M	S	E	Y
E	V	A	D	E	■	I	A	G	O	■	S	I	N	E
S	E	D	A	T	E	■	T	O	U	T	■	E	S	S
■	■	■	■	I	L	E	■	■	N	E	D	■	■	■
U	N	N	A	T	U	R	A	L	D	E	A	T	H	■
C	O	O	L	■	D	A	N	E	■	T	R	I	E	S
L	O	L	A	■	E	S	N	E	■	H	I	R	E	S
A	N	O	N	■	D	E	E	R	■	E	C	O	L	E

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MINUTE MYSTERY

BLACK WIDOW

by SARA NEUSTADTL

"Too late. Way too late."

"Right. There's the feet, easy. Watch the corner. Okay, doors shut tight?"

The ambulance reversed down the driveway, the light from its revolving cherry staining the palm fronds and poolside cabana intermittently orange. It headed for the Santa Barbara morgue.

"My mom knew these people," said the attendant to the driver. "She was learning aikido; that's where she met Doris.

"Doris came out here to set up for her nephew, Frank. She adored him, in the beginning. Bought the estate for the two of them. Made him sole beneficiary in her will."

"How do you know all this?"

"The self-defense ladies give each other advice, like, and then Mom comes home full of all the gossip. Beats the soaps. So here's Frank, a no-good, cardsharp mostly, catching this wave because he reminds Doris of her dead husband. Doris raved about how protective he was. Took her up to the botanical garden and showed her the poison oak, so she'd know what it looked like. Took her to the zoo to see the rattlers, in case she ever went up in the chapparal. They don't know about this stuff back East. He was heavy into precautions. He got her all worked up over black widow spiders."

"They're not so bad. We got one in our shed. Just don't stick your hands in dark little places is all."

"That's just what Mom told her, but then there was this catch: Doris liked Perrier. Frank kept the case in the garage, the dark, underground garage. Get it? So he tells her, watch out for spiders when you get your water. Does he move where they store it? No. He buys her a pair of garden gloves and goes, Here, wear these when you go for a bottle, and he hangs them right where she can find them.

"Doris doesn't see any harm, and so okay, she wears the gloves. Then one night she gets in the car, drops an earring. She hears it

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bouncing on the concrete in the garage. She settles down on all fours, crawls around thinking of spiders and what does she find? Gloves, new, just like the ones in the kitchen. She keeps looking and there's gloves all over, stuck in corners, nice little spider traps for Frank to shuttle to this special little hook.

"Doris is soft but she's no fool. She hires a detective. It turns out Frank's loansharking on his prospects to pay off his gambling, and unless he gets money quick, he's got a short lease on his kneecaps. Frank's got the face of Doris's dead husband, but that's it."

"She could have changed her will."

"Mom says they learn in self defense to use the enemy's own weapon against him."

"Doris'll be in awesome deep when we tell the police why this guy," the driver jerked his thumb toward Frank lying stiff in the rear, "took his last nap with half a dozen garden gloves in his bed."

DETECTIVERSE

NO SAFETY IN NUMBERS

by HELEN THILENIUS

She wed early and often, then on to the next,
Leaving stripped of their assets the many she ex'd.
Practice made perfect and a dozen years later
She was ready to split from a rich operator.
Entering court armed with foolproof assembly
(Solicitous lawyer and lips pale and trembly)
She dabbed at wet lashes, got a comforting view
Of judicial black robes, that reliable hue;
Then clutched at her lawyer and squeaked like a mouse.
The new judge, grim and glaring, had once been a spouse.

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a *NEW* short story by

JAMES POWELL

Sometimes the boundaries between genres are difficult to draw. Is a piece science fiction because imagined future technology is employed; or crime fiction because its central concern is the perpetration of a crime? The question becomes more difficult to decide in a case such as the following in which our view of events is filtered through a character numbered with the criminally insane. Only James Powell could pull off a story as tricky as this. Whether we call it science fiction or crime, we cannot but admire his skill . . .

A KEYHOLE IN TIME

by JAMES POWELL

By the front door stood a dark, burly linden, a magnificently dirty tree with something—petals, pods, leaves, or branches—to drop into every season of the year. High in its branches Hogarth's father had built a treehouse using the wooden doors left over after he'd had steel security doors installed throughout the house proper. But the treehouse wasn't for Hogarth to play in. It was a watchtower where his father sat with a rifle across his knees waiting for the day his enemies would try a sneak attack down the long gravel driveway.

Mr. Hogarth brought a patient single-mindedness to his vigilance that would have assured a sane man success in any endeavor. Every hour or so Hogarth's mother would give her son black coffee to take up the two flights of steps to the tree house. Keeping his eyes fixed on the road, Hogarth's father would lean the rifle in the corner, drink the coffee, and hand back the cup. One day the leaning rifle toppled and discharged. Or so it seemed to the coroner.

After that Hogarth took over the treehouse for his own little games. That was where his mother came looking for her cat and,

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screaming, fell backwards to her death into the rock garden around the base of the tree. The aunt who moved in to take care of Hogarth gave him no trouble after the first week or so. When he turned eighteen she seemed as happy to get away as he was to see her go.

Late on a spring morning in his twenty-fifth year, as Hogarth shaved his plump cheeks (a fairly regular practice since Janice Bell came into his life), he glanced out the second-floor window and saw a brown United Parcel truck trundle up the driveway and stop at his front door. He wasn't expecting anything. "Let them knock. Let them wait," Hogarth told himself and shaved on. But when no knock came he looked again and saw the delivery man mounting the treehouse steps carrying a clutch of boxes as high as his chin. As the man disappeared into the linden leaves Hogarth looked around for his flannel bathrobe and, not finding it, ran for his trousers in the bedroom. He was halfway down the stairs when the truck started up and drove off.

Hogarth was back scowling into the bathroom mirror and working on his pompadour when he saw a man and a woman coming down the treehouse steps. The man came first, wearing an olive L. L. Bean Poplin Travelers' Jacket, a red and black shepherd's check flannel shirt, tan chinos, and a pair of Bean's Comfort Bluchers. He walked looking backwards, with his hand raised so the woman could hold onto it. She wore the bluchers, too, and the denim weekend jumper over a teal mini-ribbed knit shirt. The woman had soft gray eyes in a round, placid face. Seeing Hogarth at the window, she gave him a matronly smile before returning her attention to the descent.

When Hogarth opened the front door the couple was standing there. The man had a small-featured, thoughtful face. "Mr. Raymond Hogarth?" he asked politely.

"If you're selling, I'm not buying," said Hogarth, adding, "and no tracts, okay? I'm not religious."

The man nodded. "We know all about you, Mr. Hogarth."

"We know about the cats," said the woman.

Hogarth hurried the couple inside and poked his head out the door to see if they'd been overheard. "Those were scientific experiments," he insisted. Their gaze was steady and solemn. "I was only a kid," he added.

"I'm John Voyce," the man said. "And this is my wife Mary." As he spoke he examined the cluttered room, passing quickly over the easy chair which faced the television set and was so heaped about with movie cassettes, paperbacks, cereal bowls, and beer cans that

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it was clearly their host's favorite. "Sit here, my dear," Voyce said to his wife, pointing to some four or five free inches of seat on a chair encumbered with a shoe, a flannel bathrobe, and a stack of books. "My wife is expecting," he explained.

"Just dump that stuff on the floor," said Hogarth.

Voyce picked up the books, glanced over the titles, and carefully set them down on the rug. "We try to disturb as little as possible," he said, taking his place by the chair in a daguerreotype pose with his hand on his wife's shoulder.

The young man sat down in the easy chair and put his hands on his knees. "Okay, shoot," he said.

"We've come far," began Voyce, "bearing a . . . "

"Not far in distance," added Mary Voyce.

Voyce bowed and gave her a kindly smile before continuing, " . . . bearing a proposition few in your condition might ever hope to get."

Hogarth's eyes narrowed. "What the hell 'condition' are you talking about?" he demanded.

"You're insane, Mr. Hogarth," said Voyce. "Quite homicidal." Hogarth started up in protest but sat back down again when Voyce added, "We know about your father."

"And your poor mother," said Mary Voyce.

"And the gun in that drawer over there," said Voyce, nodding at the telephone table. "The one you bought to kill your cousin Edgar."

Hogarth bounced out of the chair indignantly. "We'll just see who's crazy," he said, stomping over to the table and pulling open the drawer. "Well, lookee here," he exclaimed in mock discovery. He turned back to them with the .38 caliber revolver in his hand and a hard smile on his face. "Hey, so I'm a hot-blooded guy. So I get jealous," he said, as though challenging them to do something about it. Then he shrugged and lowered the weapon. "Hell, Janice would never go for Edgar."

"Oh, she'll marry him," insisted Voyce. "No, you're a tad too strange for Janice." He consulted the digital clock on the television. "Edgar's on his way here right now to break the news."

"He goddamn isn't!" shouted Hogarth. "She wouldn't! I'll kill him!" Red-faced and waving his arms, he moved toward them. "What are you, anyway, goddamn Gypsy fortunetellers?" As he passed the easy chair he accidentally kicked a video cassette from the pile, sending it sliding ahead of him across the floor.

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Voyce calmly picked up the cassette, looked at it, and set it down atop the books on the rug. "I meant to ask about this interest of yours in serial killers," he said.

These words brought the young man to a dead stop. He blinked and thought for a moment. When he spoke his voice was calm. "I guess I'm just trying to figure them out," he said. "I mean, maybe I'm missing something, but with my mom and dad it was like eggs and omelets. You know, you want the omelet,"—he made a proprietary gesture that took in the house and the land beyond the walls—"you got to break the eggs. But with this random killing stuff, what's the point?" His words took on a harder edge. "So that's my interest in serial killers. Now who the hell are you?"

"My wife and I are yester-engineers," said Voyce. "We fine-tune the past to suit the needs of our time. Of the future. We've had you under observation for years, Mr. Hogarth." Voyce smiled at the young man's confusion. "No, of course you don't understand. Keyholes in time won't be discovered for another five centuries."

Hogarth giggled and sat down on an arm of his easy chair. "Yeah, sure. Keyholes in time."

"John's great-great-grandfather found the first one," said Mary Voyce proudly.

"On a picnic," said Voyce. "While the others hunted wildflowers and morels he chose to wander off alone. The day was humid. Suddenly he felt a curious puff of dry air against his cheek. He raised his hand and felt it on his palm. Putting his eye to the little breeze, he saw spread out before him ancient Ninevah, 'that rose-red city half as old as time,' as the poet tells us."

"Petra, dear," said Mary Voyce. "The 'rose-red city,' et cetera, was Petra, not Ninevah."

John Voyce's look was only momentarily severe. He gave her a grateful smile. "Correction duly noted, my dear." Then he turned back to Hogarth. "For the next few years, Great-great-grandfather roamed the countryside palm vertical, searching for more keyholes in time. They weren't all that rare once you knew where to look. Ancient battle sites were a good place. In fact he once considered a compilation, *Voyce's Keyhole Guide to the Battlefields of the American Civil War,* that would doubtless have made his fortune. Instead . . . "

"Strange, isn't it, Raymond?" asked Mary Voyce. "Without the Civil War few of your male contemporaries would know any history at all?"

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"Instead," repeated Voyce firmly, "Great-great-grandfather kept the keyholes a secret, sharing them only with other serious observers of the slow unraveling of the daily life of the past. They soon discovered that for every keyhole there was a door, an entry into the past. And so the science of yester-engineering was born. Of course it was years before we actually tried tinkering to alter history's course."

Mary Voyce said, "Raymond, don't think of history as a highway you could travel if you only had Time's winged chariot with the odometer ticking off the years. No, the past, present, and future are right here only a keyhole's thickness away. This very spot which you call Powder Horn Hill and the Indians called Mattawasa or High Gathering Place, we call Junkyard Ridge. Here, during the Second Genetic War, Seven-Toes the Foot and his Mongrel Horde crushed the Tin Dragoons, an early prototype of the Robot Grenadiers. This battle . . . "

Hogarth swallowed hard and turned white before their eyes. "I used to get these nightmares," he whispered. "First it's pitch dark. Then this terrible racket starts up, like some distant battle coming my way and coming fast. Suddenly, whammo, it's blood and fire everywhere and men and machines and body parts, cogwheels, boilerplate, and pistons flying through the air. Then clang! clang! in jumps this big hairy guy, bare to the waist and bashing left and right with this crazy-looking mother of all hammers."

"A sledge laser," said Voyce. "That was Foot. And the machines he was bashing looked like dumpsters with nineteen fifties Pontiac tail fins, right?" Voyce returned Hogarth's nod. "The Tin Dragoons," he said.

"Anyway, this Foot guy sees me," said the young man in a trembling voice. "And he lets out a roar and heads my way. I want to run but my legs won't work. I scream myself awake."

"A pity your mother wasn't around to rock you in her arms and comfort you," said Mary Voyce.

Hogarth sat frightened and breathing heavily.

"The matrix between past and future can wear thin," explained Voyce. "Sometimes the future bleeds through into dreams. Sometimes the past casts those night shadows men used to call ghosts." He looked at the clock. "All right," he said quickly, "here's what's going to happen. When Edgar arrives you'll both start shouting insults. Then he'll give this laugh like you're dirt."

"That's Edgar, all right," said Hogarth bitterly.

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"Then he'll start for the door," said Voyce. "And you'll come this close—" Voyce peered at Hogarth through the barest slit between the balls of his thumb and forefinger. "—to shooting him. But then you'll say, quote, 'Ah, what the expletive deleted!' unquote and throw the gun aside. For the next twenty-five years you'll nurse your hatred. Then one June day you'll bump into Edgar on the street, and suddenly you'll let it all come out. When Edgar does his laugh again and calls you a looney tune, you'll shoot him dead and live the rest of your life a homicidal nobody in an institution for the criminally insane."

"Why tell me all this?" demanded Hogarth.

"Don't wait," urged Voyce. "Kill Edgar now."

"Now, Raymond," agreed Mary Voyce. "Please."

Hogarth looked at them. "Hey, I get it," he said. "You people are trying to jigger around with history. Well, I'm not stupid. I know you can't do that, not without screwing things up real good."

"There will be repercussions, of course," said Voyce. "But time isn't a clockwork thing. It lives. It heals itself. Every age has its terra incognitos and Bermuda Triangles to sweep the remnants into wherever the coat of history has to be recut to fit the needs of the future. Repercussions? I was only a boy when we reached through time to inoculate an ancestor of Mr. Arkangelus lest he pass beyond the spotted veil of the small pox. That needle prick, as necessary as it was, sent a timestorm across the future that I remember well. It was as if life itself had stumbled. Buildings seemed knocked out of kilter, dreams cracked and filled up with blood. But in time things righted themselves and dreams ran clear again. Or so it seemed." Voyce paused and rubbed his temples. Mary Voyce reached up and laid her hand on his forearm.

"Of course, yester-engineering has learned much since those rudimentary days," Voyce continued. "Ours will be a minimal disturbance of the past, a surgical strike. After all, you almost did kill Edgar here today. We anticipate a timestorm within acceptable parameters."

"What other choice do we have, Raymond dear?" asked Mary Voyce.

"Things are in a bad way back home," explained Voyce. "Our wars and their consequences seem to have turned nature itself against us. First came the Great Upchuck when as one the Seven Seas vomited up everything man had buried beneath the waves in the last five thousand years. Our seacoasts and the mighty cities thereon

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have become dumps of rotting garbage and shipwreck graveyards inhabited by millions of sea gulls and a few madmen poking around with pointed sticks looking for doubloons. Next came the Wormwood Winds to pucker and embitter the land."

"And don't forget the serpent's tooth of the Anthropophagi Children," shuddered Mary Voyce.

"Listen, Mr. Hogarth," said Voyce earnestly, "several years ago, before we were visited by these new horrors, a man called Mr. Arkangelus, one whose way we, the yester-engineers, had been preparing for so long, rose up among the people of our country to urge us to turn our backs on war and to judge men not by the contents of their shoes but by the contents of their character. Under his leadership we were able to make a start at turning our land into an eye of sanity in the mad hurricane of killing and butchery that raged around us. But one day a madman named Harth, a deranged dealer in plastic antiques, stepped out of a cheering crowd holding a pocket howitzer and blew Mr. Arkangelus away. This Harth was a descendant of your cousin Edgar."

"Hey," said Hogarth quietly, "you want me to kill Edgar now before he has any descendants, so your Mr. Arkangelus doesn't get killed. Well, why the hell should I? What's the future ever done for me?" He got out of his chair and swaggered a couple of steps. Then he swaggered back. "But now it's going to have to, right? Now the future's going to have to give me anything I want."

Voyce shook his head firmly. "No winning lottery numbers, no dissolving bullet to keep you out of the asylum. Unleashing a homicidal multimillionaire on the world would hardly make our visit here a surgical strike."

Hogarth gave a bright, high-pitched laugh. "Then why should I give a rat's ass about your people?"

"Here's the proposition we've come to make," said Voyce. "Kill Edgar now and we promise the future will stand in reverent awe before your statues and make pilgrimages to the keyhole of your asylum to cluck over how hard-done-by you are. And on Raymond Hogarth Day orators will hold forth on your character. And hoary-headed old men will say, 'By God, if Raymond Hogarth was mad, I wish the same dog that bit him would bite me.' "

"And don't forget the song, dear," Mary Voyce reminded him, producing a pitch pipe.

Voyce rubbed his temples and forced a smile in his wife's direction. "And last but not least," he said, "children will sing songs about you in our schools."

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"All dressed in coonskin hats," smiled Mary Voyce. "And our own child will be among them." Then she tooted on the pitch pipe and she and her husband sang:

"Born in a house near I 83,
Little orphan boy who lived in a tree,
Killed him his cousin so we could all be free.
More misunderstood than either you or me.
Raymond, Raymond Hogarth, King of the Past Frontier.
Raymond, Raymond Hogarth, King of the Past Frontier."

Singers and listener were too caught up in the song to notice the car until it pulled up out front. "I liked the 'orphan' part," said Hogarth damply as he went to get the door.

"Hey, Ray, how's it going?" said Cousin Edgar. "Got something to tell you that can't wait. Janice and I . . . " Noticing the Voyces he said, "Hey, excusez moi, you've got visitors." Then the revolver made him add, "Jesus!"

"My friends from the future here just told me if I kill you right now, schoolchildren will sing songs about me and old guys will say . . . " Hogarth looked at John Voyce.

" . . . 'By God, if Hogarth was mad, I wish the same dog that bit him would bite me,' " repeated Voyce.

Edgar eyed Voyce and his wife before looking back at Hogarth. "You're all a bunch of looney tunes," he said.

Smiling, Hogarth looked at John Voyce.

"Do it," said Voyce.

Hogarth looked at Mary Voyce.

"Please do it, Raymond," she said.

Hogarth smiled at Edgar. "You dirty son of a bitch," he said. "You mother . . . " The gunshots drowned out his words.

At first Hogarth told the calmer inmates of the asylum about the Voyces and showed them his profile, the shape of coins and stamps to come. They heard him out and looked and nodded. But in return they expected the young man to hear their own wild ravings. So Hogarth started sitting off by himself or striking and holding heroic poses out in the exercise yard and beaming with pleasure if a pigeon landed on his shoulder. In the dining hall he would often scorn his plate and look around at the walls as if to ask, "Is this hero food?"

But after several years these things were no longer enough. Hogarth decided the time had come to visit the future and let it honor

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him directly. So he escaped over the asylum wall and found his way home.

The house stood empty in the moonlight, the weeds thick and high, the linden droppings a hefty drift against the front door. Hogarth took the steps up to the treehouse. The floor was strewn with old L. L. Bean cardboard, rags, and cracked blucher leather, the tattered stuff of generations of squirrel nests. He smiled at the many doors, knowing one of them would take him where he wanted to go. Then he moved around inside the treehouse putting his palm to each keyhole until he came to the one where the tiny draft blew hard and cold like a sip of the future. He pushed on the door. When it didn't budge he threw his shoulder against it. The door opened. Hogarth stepped boldly through into the bracing air.

Hogarth felt a dizzy, tumbling moment as the door clicked neatly shut behind him. When he regained his balance he found himself walking down a dark alleyway which emerged onto a street lit by globes floating moonlike in the air. Tall, cockeyed, garishly colored buildings teetered over him in carnival menace. An odd blue gray dust lay underfoot. A street sign said, "Junkyard Ridge Road." Beneath it sat a large transparent egg with a seat inside and "Hogarthville Landcab Co." written across the side. Hogarthville! Hogarth smiled to the point of tears. When he touched the letters of his name the egg hummed, rose several inches out of the dust, and its door slid open. Hogarth got in. The door closed. A sudden baritone spoke inside his head and made him jump. "Destination, please?" it asked. Hogarth thought he'd like to see the sights before revealing himself to the population. But before he could say so the egg said, "Thank you" and moved off, small end first.

"We are now entering Bellview Village," reported the egg after a moment. "This section of the city takes its name from the woman whose love Hogarth had to sacrifice to save the future. Its many small shops, restaurants, and galleries are home to our writers' and artists' colony . . . " As the egg droned on Hogarth searched the well-lit establishments for signs of life. Where the hell was everybody?

The egg turned off onto Raymond Hogarth Boulevard, a broad avenue lined with impressive buildings, all now trim, perpendicular, and done in muted colors. Or so it seemed. "On the left is the Raymond Hogarth Museum and Convention Center," said the egg, as they passed a pile of granite and marble crowned with an impressive dome.

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"What's that doohickey up there on top?" demanded Hogarth.

"The pompadoured dome is a characteristic of the Hogarthian Baroque Revival and is featured widely in the works of Castelani and Pinto the Elder," said the egg. A moment later it continued, "On your right I call your attention to the ever-popular Raymond Hogarth Theme Park, containing the much-imitated but never-duplicated House in the Linden Tree Waterslide descending into a pool shaped like Raymond Hogarth's kidney."

"Where the hell is everybody?" demanded Hogarth.

The egg ignored the question. "On your right," it said, "stands the tomb of our departed leader, Mr. Arkangelus, designed by Gilly." The carved bronze doors of the solemn structure were draped in black and heaped around with dusty wreaths of flowers. Hogarth jerked around for a better look as they passed.

As he faced forward again the boulevard took a majestic curve and Hogarth saw an astonishing sight. "Hey, lookee there!" he said out loud. Ahead towered a twenty-story-high statue of a leaner and handsomer Hogarth done in bronze with revolver in hand and a light flashing atop the pompadour as a warning to low-flying aircraft. The fleshy Hogarth's jaw dropped. The bronze had captured him rising from an immense easy chair. Between its ball-and-claw feet was a wide tunnel into which the boulevard disappeared.

Before the egg reached the tunnel it pulled off into a parking area beneath the foothill of vast bronze cereal bowls, paperbacks, beer cans, and videocassettes. Settling down into the dust, the egg announced, "The elevator will take you to the top of the viewing tower."

The clear plastic tube rushed Hogarth to an open-air platform. The voice of the egg went with him. "Here," it said, "we have Baleen's famous statue of Raymond Hogarth about to shoot his cousin Edgar. Note the air of reluctance, the distasteful half turning away of the head and the lips about to utter his unforgettable words: 'So perishes the assassin tree, root and branch!' " Wow, thought Hogarth. But the capsule biography that followed was tourist guff. And there weren't any tourists. There wasn't anybody.

"Where did everybody get to?" Hogarth demanded again. When the egg did not reply, he waved at a large red brick structure in the distance. "Okay, then what the hell's that over there?"

"The John and Mary Voyce Memorial Hospital for the Insane," intoned the egg, "is dedicated to the memory of the intrepid pair of

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yester-engineers who ventured into the heart of darkest history to bring Raymond Hogarth to our rescue.

"After a lifetime of service to humanity, one day poor John Voyce's mind snapped and as he moved to strike his wife Mary their son knocked him down. John Voyce hit his head on the corner of an end table. A fatal blow. A broken-hearted Mary Voyce wasted away and quickly followed after him. At the time our beloved Mr. Arkangelus declared, 'Never have so many owed so much to just two.' Perhaps today he would have said, 'just three,' for their son, Dr. John Voyce, Jr., later found fame in his own right as the discoverer of bedlamite gas, the newest weapon in our arsenal of freedom. Although harmless to people, property, and the environment, a single whiff turns the criminally insane to dust. Had Mr. Arkangelus's suicide not followed so closely on the announcement of Dr. Voyce's discovery, he most surely would have used the occasion to warn our maniac neighbors to cease conspiring and plotting against us. Otherwise we will be compelled to bring them to heel with the whips and scorpions of bedlamite gas!"

For a long time Hogarth remained up there on the observation tower, his head and forearms resting on the railing. At last he straightened up, wiped his eyes, stuck out his chin, and looked across the bright city. Anybody thinking he was going to let himself end up like this, like some damned Mickey Mouse doomed to roam the empty streets of a Disneyland hell forever, well, they'd better think again. He knew what he had to do.

Hogarth took the elevator back down to the egg. A few minutes later he was striding down the dusty aisles of Hogarthville's nearest thing to a shopping mall. When he'd found everything he needed, he stopped at a bar in the mall called Ray's Easy Chair and helped himself to a quick beer. Then he got another which he took his time over, a figure dressed in black from head to toe, sitting on a bar stool whorling the blade of a hunting knife across an oiled whetstone.

Yes, the other keyholes in time were his now. All he had to do was find them. And he would, blessed as he was with his father's single-mindedness. In fact, he promised himself he'd find a new one that very night. If the Voyces could change history, so could he. And he might as well get started. Of course he wasn't a yester-engineer. No surgical strike for him. No fine-tuning. His methods would be more in the hack-and-slash, hit-and-miss line. He would kill until his arm was too tired to kill again. By morning Nineveh or Petra

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or New York or London would be red with blood, not roses. Then he'd slip back here. And if what he'd done hadn't got Hogarthville back to some reasonable facsimile of how it was supposed to be, why then there'd be other nights and other doors. Yes, he'd weather the timestorms and keep at it until he got the damn thing right.

Hogarth took the last swallow of beer. Smiling, he held the bottle up to his eye like a telescope and squinted inside. "Hey, you there, you with the book," he whispered. "Can't you feel my eyes? My knife's so eager to do the job it stirs in my hand. Can't you hear it? Hey, turn around. That's me right behind you, standing in the doorway in the dark corner where there was no door before."

Hogarth ran the knife into its sheath. He was ready for the night's work. It was egg and omelet time. Let the fools preach of random, senseless, gratuitous killings. That just meant they didn't know the reason. But he, like the gods, knew the answer to the mystery loud and clear. He was doing all this so little children would sing about him in school. As he'd been promised.

Humming to himself, Hogarth left the bar, his palm vertical to the ground, searching for the next keyhole in time.

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a *NEW* Ben Snow story by

EDWARD D. HOCH

As this issue reaches the newsstands, the 101st anniversary of the most baffling crime in American history will be fast approaching. Volumes, factual and fictional, have been written about the Borden case, but few writers have put their imaginations to work about Lizzie's life after the trial. In "The Passion of Lizzie B.," Mr. Hoch imagines her going out West, bound for a fresh start. . . .

THE PASSION OF LIZZIE B.

by EDWARD D. HOCH

It was in early July of '94 that Ben Snow left his horse Oats at a stable in Cheyenne and boarded a train for Omaha, nearly five hundred miles to the east. He'd been north to Canada and south to Texas, but had never visited the growing nation's midsection. Luckily, this stretch of track had not yet been shut down by the violence of the Pullman strike, and he was able to make the journey without incident. The man he was meeting had offered a nice financial reward for his time and trouble.

That man was named Cyrus Clant, and he was waiting at the station when Ben stepped off the train in Omaha. He looked Ben up and down after introducing himself and asked, "Where are your six-shooters?"

Ben smiled at the short, timid-looking man with the gray moustache. "Your letter stated you wanted someone to protect you. I've done that sort of work out West, but I imagined it would be different in Omaha. My guns are in here." He indicated the bulging carpetbag at his feet.

"That's good," the little man said. "Bring it along and we'll go to my place."

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Clant resided in a house only a few blocks from the wide and winding Missouri River. It was in a section of modest Victorian-style homes. As he parked his carriage in front he pointed out across the river. "That's Iowa over there, Mr. Snow. We're right on the state line here."

"I've never seen this part of the country before," Ben admitted. He followed his employer into the parlor and found himself in a jungle of houseplants.

"My wife liked them," Cyrus Clant explained. "I'm in the process of thinning them out."

"Your wife?"

"She died last year of influenza."

"I'm sorry."

"Have a seat, Mr. Snow. That brings us to the reason I wrote you. I was told by a gentleman down Texas way that you—"

Suddenly a middle-aged woman entered the parlor from what Ben presumed to be the kitchen. "Good afternoon, Cyrus," she said.

He was visibly startled. "My dear, I didn't realize you were in the house. Ben Snow, this is Lizzie Benson."

"How do you do?" Ben said, rising to take her hand. She was a plain-looking woman with reddish hair and large attractive eyes, wearing a long black dress that reached to the floor.

"Shall I prepare some tea for you gentlemen?" she asked.

"That would be nice, Lizzie. Then if you could excuse us, we have some business to go over."

Cyrus Clant kept up a rambling conversation about the city and his successful hardware business until the tea was ready. After Lizzie announced she was off to do some shopping, he settled back with his cup. "Help yourself to the biscuits," he told Ben, "and we'll get down to business."

The front door closed and Ben saw Lizzie Benson's head pass by the front window. "Is she a neighbor?" he asked.

"No, no. She may become the next Mrs. Clant. The newspapers here often carry personal ads from eastern women wanting to move west and find a potential husband. When my dear wife passed away I was extremely lonely. I answered a few of these ads and the reply from Miss Benson was most cordial. After a few months' correspondence I invited her to journey out here and get better acquainted."

"She seems like a nice woman," Ben said, trying to be polite. In truth he had formed no opinion about Lizzie Benson.

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"She's been in Omaha for a month now, living in a boardinghouse a few blocks from here. I find her a pleasant, agreeable woman, a bit on the quiet side. She seems to have a shrewd business sense, and has given me some good ideas for my hardware store."

"You wrote me two weeks ago, Mr. Clant. Might I assume your problem is connected with Miss Benson?"

The short man sighed. "There's a fellow working at my store, name of Seth Rankin. He's young, about your age."

"I'm thirty-five," Ben admitted. "Not all that young."

"Well, he's probably in his late twenties. Anyway, he's unmarried and his hobby is reading all those dime novels from back East. He reads stories about true murders too. He told me something about Lizzie Benson that I can't get out of my mind."

"What's that?"

Cyrus Clant rubbed his palms nervously over his trousers. "Seth thinks she's Lizzie Borden, the axe murderess."

Most eastern crimes made little impression upon people like Ben Snow who lived west of the Mississippi, but even he had heard of Lizzie Borden and the sensational murder trial the previous year at which she'd been acquitted of charges that she brutally murdered her father and stepmother. The eyes of the nation had been focused on the courthouse in New Bedford, Massachusetts, and even little children recited poems about the number of blows Lizzie struck with her axe. Still, the verdict of not guilty was cheered in the courtroom and almost universally hailed across the nation.

With the passage of time, that began to change. Lizzie went home to live with her sister at a different house in Fall River, and some people began to feel that she might indeed have been guilty, though the state had failed to prove it.

"I've heard of the case," Ben admitted, "but I don't believe I ever saw a picture of her."

"I have one here that I obtained from the local library." He produced an illustrated magazine and turned to an inside page where an account of the trial began. There were photographs of Lizzie Borden, her father, and stepmother. "You see the resemblance?"

"It's a poor picture. One can't be certain." Yet Ben had to admit that this could well be the likeness of Lizzie Benson, the woman he'd met just a quarter of an hour earlier. "But isn't Lizzie Borden still back East?"

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"Who knows for certain? This article says she lives with her sister and is rarely seen. What could prevent her from placing that personal ad and coming out here under the transparent alias of Lizzie Benson?"

"Where was she living when you wrote her?"

"The letters went to a post office box in Taunton, Massachusetts. That's very close to Fall River."

"Why do you need me?" Ben wanted to know. "If you don't want to marry her, give her a ticket back East and be done with it."

"If she is Lizzie Borden, she might not appreciate being jilted."

"You're afraid of her?"

"When I was showing her around my hardware store she picked up an axe. It gave me a jolt, seeing her with it."

"All right," Ben decided. "I'll stay a week. By that time we should know if she's dangerous or not."

Clant drained the rest of the tea from his cup. "That will be just fine, Mr. Snow."

It developed that Clant had given Lizzie a part-time job, working at his hardware store three afternoons a week. The following day Ben found her there, dusting shelves and bins with a feather duster. She recognized him at once. "Hello again, Mr. Snow. You've decided to stay with us for a bit?"

He nodded. "I've taken a room at the Hotel Omaha till next week. Then I'll be heading back West."

"Are you a friend of Cyrus's?"

"An acquaintance. This is my first trip to Omaha and I decided to look him up."

She put down the feather duster and picked up a big metal scoop, using it to combine two bins of small nails into one. "I'm trying to get Cyrus to weigh these nails and package them in five-pound bags. That's the way some stores back East do it. Why spend the rest of your life selling things for a penny or two each?"

"You have a good business sense," Ben told her. "Did you work in a store back East?"

"No, not really. It comes natural to me, I suppose."

"Is your name Lizzie short for something?"

She paused in her work to stare at him. "My, you are full of questions, Mr. Snow. I use the name Lizbeth now, but Lizzie's what's on my birth certificate. I'm used to being called that."

"I guess we're about the same age, aren't we, Lizzie? I'm thirty-five."

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"I don't mind telling my age. I'm a year younger."

"I've had a strange life, out West. I was born the same year as William Bonney—Billy the Kid. He was killed in '81, but a whole lot of people think he's still alive. Because I had a young face and was fast with a gun, folks got the idea I was Billy the Kid. It's caused me a great deal of misery in my life. Nothing worse than being mistaken for a killer."

"Why are you telling me this?" she asked. Her face had gone white.

"Just making conversation." He turned away and became interested in some brooms.

There were two full-time employees at Clant's hardware store. One was Seth Rankin, a stout man a bit younger than Ben. He was the one who'd first voiced his suspicions about Lizzie to Cyrus Clant. The other was a young woman, Theresa Sanchez, whose western-style skirt came to just below her knees, unlike the more proper full-length frock that Lizzie Benson wore. It was the Sanchez woman who approached him now, asking if she could help him.

"I'm just looking around," Ben told her. "Mr. Clant is an old friend of mine."

"Are you in town for the wedding?" she asked, pumping him for information he didn't have. She had a dark, musky scent about her, promising more tales than Scheherazade.

"I think the wedding's a long ways off," Ben told her.

Theresa Sanchez glanced back over her shoulder. "Not to hear her tell it! She's already acting like the second Mrs. Clant."

Ben spent the remainder of the afternoon drifting around the streets of the city. There was a big meat-packing plant, located conveniently close to the railroad that had brought him east, and a state school for the deaf. The downtown area was unlike anything farther west. Only once or twice did he see a slight bulge under a gentleman's coat that hinted at a hidden weapon.

He ate dinner at his hotel and read about the Pullman strike in the Omaha *Bee*, one of the city's daily newspapers. A few of the men around the lobby were reading the *World-Herald*, which seemed to be a younger paper edited by someone named William Jennings Bryan. One of the newspaper articles told about a new organization of businessmen named Ak-Sar-Ben, formed to promote interest in the history and progress of the city and the state. Ben studied the name for a minute or two before he realized it was Nebraska spelled backwards.

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Finally he returned to the Clant home shortly before eight o'clock. Lizzie Benson had prepared dinner for Clant, and the two were seated in the parlor. The screen door was unhooked and when he called to them he was invited inside.

"You should have joined us," Lizzie said, seeming more friendly than she had earlier.

"It was my fault for not inviting you," Clant insisted. "You must dine with us for the rest of your stay."

Ben accepted a glass of wine and was just settling in to join their conversation when they were interrupted by a knocking on the screen door. Clant went to answer it and Ben saw a police officer step inside. "Afraid I have some bad news, Mr. Clant. There's been a robbery at your store. One of your clerks has been hurt real bad."

"What? What's that?" His face dissolved into panic. "Is it Theresa?"

"It's Seth Rankin. He's been taken to the hospital, but it doesn't look good. He's unconscious and he's lost a lot of blood."

"Someone shot him?"

The officer shook his head. "He was hit in the head with an axe."

They took Clant's carriage to the hospital at once, with Lizzie remaining at the house. The store owner seemed extremely agitated and even Ben was unable to comfort him. When they reached the hospital, there was more bad news waiting. Seth Rankin had died of a massive head injury without ever regaining consciousness.

"Who could have done such a thing?" Cyrus Clant asked, appealing to anyone who'd listen. "There's never been trouble at my store before. I've never been robbed."

Ben drove Cyrus directly to the hardware store in the carriage. It was about a mile from the Clant house and the same distance from the hospital, on a dark street that seemed much more sinister to Ben than it had just that afternoon. A police officer was on duty at the front door and the interior was illuminated by gaslights. The place seemed somehow smaller at night than Ben remembered it, and as they entered he was startled by a plainclothes detective who'd been examining the floor behind one of the counters. He rose to the flickering light like some avenging angel and spoke to Cyrus.

"Good evening, Mr. Clant. It's Sergeant Hastley."

"Oh, Sergeant! You startled us. This is Ben Snow, a friend who's visiting from out West."

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Hastley shook hands, demonstrating a grip of steel. "You one of them cowpokes?"

"Sometimes," Ben acknowledged.

Hastley was a broad, muscular man who wore a holstered Colt revolver conspicuously beneath the coat of his brown suit. "We've got a bad situation here," he told Cyrus Clant. "Looks like a robbery, but we can't be sure. What time was Seth supposed to close up tonight?"

"The store closes at six, but sometimes he stayed on later if there was work to be done. He was a good employee. I can't believe anyone would kill him."

"Were you here this afternoon?"

"We were all here. Lizzie was helping out, and even Mr. Snow stopped by. Wednesday is often busy, and my other clerk, Theresa Sanchez, was working too."

"Notice anyone acting suspicious?" He'd taken out a notebook and pencil.

"Nothing out of the ordinary."

"But it was a busy day with lots of money in the cash register?"

Cyrus Clant nodded. "A reasonable amount. I counted up before I left and there was around six hundred dollars. That's good for us. Is it gone?"

"The register was cleaned out," Hastley confirmed. "The officer on the beat was checking the shop doors and he noticed lights still burning in here. The door was unlocked and he came in. This was around seven-thirty, while it was still daylight. His first thought was that someone was after the guns you sell, but then he spotted Rankin's body behind the register here, right where I'm standing."

At the mention of the guns Clant walked over to the big padlocked case against the wall. It hadn't been tampered with. "You're certain it was an axe that did it, Sergeant?"

"It was right next to the body. One of yours, I'd judge. Looked new, with a little gilt decoration on it still."

Cyrus Clant nodded sadly. "We have a display of them over here."

Sergeant Hastley frowned as he walked over to look at the axes with their shiny blades. "See, that's the one thing makes me question the robbery motive. Wouldn't a stick-up man have brought along his own weapon?"

"He might have had a pistol that misfired," Ben suggested, leaning over to study the axes himself. "This display was handy so he grabbed an axe."

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"If the pistol misfired, why go for an axe? The gun in his hand could have been used as a club."

"The man had no enemies," Clant observed. "Who else but a bandit would have a motive for killing him?"

"That's what I'm trying to figure out. Just you and Theresa Sanchez worked here with him, right?"

"That's correct—just the three of us. I mentioned that my friend Lizzie Benson was helping out today too. We were all in the store at one time or another this afternoon. Seth stayed on for a bit after six."

"You and Miss Benson left together?"

"We did. She went to her boardinghouse first to freshen up, then came on over to my place to help prepare dinner. She was there well before seven-thirty."

Sergeant Hastley nodded. "I didn't mean to imply the robbery and assault took place at that time. When the dying man was found some of the blood was already dry. I figure it must have happened shortly after you left at six. You were alone at your house then, Mr. Clant?"

"Well, yes—for a short period until Miss Benson arrived."

"I'll want to talk to her," the detective said. "What about you, Mr. Snow? Where were you just after six o'clock?"

"I had dinner at my hotel and then sat in the lobby reading a newspaper."

"Alone?"

"Alone unless someone remembers seeing me."

"Will you be staying in Omaha very long?"

"The rest of the week, at least."

"That's good. I may want to see you again." He turned to Cyrus Clant. "I'm finished here. Will you lock up?"

Clant nodded and dug out his keys. "Keep me informed, Sergeant. I want Seth's killer behind bars."

"So do we."

Clant drove the carriage back to his house. He seemed anxious to return to Lizzie but apprehensive at the same time. "It's the axe, isn't it?" Ben suggested quietly.

"Of course it's the axe! There are probably a dozen weapons in my store, not even counting the guns—hammers, screwdrivers, lengths of rope and chain, rat poison, black powder, knives of all sorts, saws, kerosene—but this killer has to choose an axe. Why?"

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"The display was handy," Ben suggested.

"Or the killer was someone who knew how to handle one."

"That too."

He reigned up the horse as they reached his house. "Do you think he caught Lizzie taking that money from the register?"

Ben considered the question. "If she needed money, I think she'd have simply asked you."

"I hope so!"

They entered the house and found Lizzie seated at the dining room table with a deck of cards, playing a game of solitaire. She leaped up as they came in. "I've been so worried! What happened? How is he?"

"Seth is dead," Cyrus Clant told her.

"Oh God!"

"You mustn't upset yourself about it. The police will find his killer."

"But an axe! What a horrible way to die! Was he conscious at all? Did he say who killed him?"

"No. He died before regaining consciousness."

Ben was watching her face, but it showed no reaction to this news. "I'm afraid it dampens our evening together," Clant told her. "I'm really very tired now. Mr. Snow, could you see Lizzie back to her boardinghouse?"

"Certainly."

She followed him to the stairs and they spoke a few quiet words together. Then she returned and picked up a lightweight black coat she'd worn over her dress. "I'm ready to go now, Mr. Snow."

The rooming house was close-by, and they'd walked much of the way in silence before Lizzie finally spoke. "You don't like me, do you?"

"I barely know you, Miss Benson."

"Cyrus hired you to check up on me, didn't he?"

"Not exactly. It was something—" He let the rest of the sentence drift away. Suddenly he'd remembered that it was Seth Rankin who'd first raised the question of Lizzie's true identity.

As if she could sense the direction of his thoughts, she countered with a question of her own. "Are you really Billy the Kid?"

"Are you really Lizzie Borden?" he shot back, almost before he realized what he was saying.

She gave a short, sharp laugh. "Well, now the cat's really out of the bag!"

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"It doesn't matter to me what or who you are."

She turned on him with a fierce passion. "That's right, and it shouldn't matter to Cyrus, either! I came all the way out here looking to start a new life. What difference does it make if I'm Lizzie Benson or Lizzie Borden or Lizzie Brown?"

"It shouldn't have made a difference until this evening. Now someone has been killed with an axe."

"I had nothing to do with that!"

He stared at her upturned face reflecting the glow from the overhead gaslights. She was not a pretty woman, but at that moment he would not have called her unattractive. "Rankin believed you to be Lizzie Borden. That might have been motive enough for you to kill him."

"Do you believe that?"

"I'm going to try to show Cyrus you're innocent," Ben said.

"That I'm not Lizzie Borden?"

"That you didn't kill Seth Rankin."

In the morning Cyrus Clant supplied Ben with Rankin's home address. The murdered man had lived alone in a small house out near the fairgrounds. "His wife went west with another man," Clant told Ben. "He mentioned it just once and then never spoke of it again."

Gaining entry to the locked house was no problem for Ben once he'd established that the police didn't have it under guard. The interior showed definite signs of a bachelor existence, with unwashed dishes and a pile of dirty clothes. It was impossible to tell if the police or anyone else had come there ahead of Ben.

He concentrated on searching a desk, but found little except ten-year-old correspondence received by Rankin's wife; there seemed to be nothing from her since she'd gone west. The only thing of interest was a letter from the U.S. Repeating Arms Company thanking Rankin for the store's recent large order. It was dated June 4, 1894, barely a month earlier. Ben wondered why Rankin rather than Clant would have placed a large order for anything. It was Clant's hardware store, after all.

Ben looked quietly through the closets but found nothing of interest. Some women's clothes were still there, as if Rankin had kept them for his wife's possible return. The most interesting discovery was the dead man's collection of dime novels and pamphlets carrying accounts of famous murder cases. One, *The Fall River Tragedy,* had been privately published just after the preceding year's Borden trial

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by a reporter named Edwin H. Porter. A quick glance through its pages showed the author had little doubt regarding Lizzie's guilt. He saw again the photograph that Cyrus had shown him. There was no denying the striking resemblance to Lizzie Benson.

He exited the house by the back door, careful not to be seen. He had borrowed a carriage used for store deliveries, and he drove it back through the busy streets of the city to Clant's Hardware. Inside he found only Theresa Sanchez on duty. "Mr. Clant and Lizzie have gone to the funeral parlor," she explained. "Poor Seth had no family here, and they're making the arrangements for burial."

"Wasn't there an ex-wife?"

"No one knows what happened to her," Theresa said with a shake of her head.

"Did you know her?"

"Not really. I may have seen her in the store once or twice, but she left not long after I started work here."

"I'm trying to track down some large orders Seth placed recently," Ben told her. "I wonder if you could show me your suppliers' invoices for the past two months."

Theresa moved past him to the counter, and once again he caught the musky scent of her perfume. She took out a spindle upon which were impaled numerous pieces of paper. "We keep them here for each quarter and then Mr. Clant files them away." Ben couldn't help noting that she stood exactly where Sergeant Hastley had said Seth's body was found. "He hasn't gotten to this batch yet."

Ben went through the invoices quickly, searching for one from the U.S. Repeating Arms Company, but as far back as the first of April there was nothing. He was about to give it up as a dead end when he noticed an oddity. The spindle had left its usual hole through each of the invoices, but those near the top had two holes, as if they'd been removed and then quickly impaled again without regard to the first hole. Almost all of the June invoices had two holes, suggesting that someone had wanted an invoice from the first few days of that month.

"How do you handle these invoices?" Ben asked. "You must return one copy with your payment."

"That's correct," Theresa Sanchez agreed, brushing the long black bangs from her forehead. "One copy is returned and the other copy filed on the spindle."

"Are there ever third copies?"

"Occasionally, but we rarely keep them unless there's a problem."

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"You must have a ledger to record payments to suppliers."

"Certainly."

"Could I see it?"

Now she hesitated, apparently deciding she'd already gone too far. "You'd have to see Mr. Clant about that."

"Of course."

Cyrus Clant returned with Lizzie about thirty minutes later. His eyes were dark and he appeared tired. "It's a hard thing to do, bury a friend and employee."

"He handled himself very well," Lizzie assured Ben.

"I need to talk to you," Ben told him.

"Is it important?"

"It might be."

"Run along," Lizzie insisted. "I'll help Theresa."

"Well—just into my office for a few minutes, Snow."

Ben came right to the point as Cyrus closed his office door. "Have you ever done business with the U.S. Repeating Arms Company?"

"Of course. They manufacture Winchester rifles. We have some out in the case."

"Have you placed an especially large order recently?"

Clant thought about it. "Not that I know of."

"Theresa let me glance through the invoices on the spindle, but she wouldn't let me see the ledgers. Said I'd have to ask you."

"What does all this have to do with Seth's murder?"

"Perhaps nothing. But he received a letter from the company last month thanking him for the large order."

"What?"

"Can you look through your payments?"

Frowning, Cyrus Clant turned to the shelves behind him and took down a large ledger. "We don't have a regular bookkeeper, you understand. The books are audited each January." He went down the list for May and June, and suddenly frowned. "Here's a notation for U.S. Repeating Arms—a credit for a mistaken shipment that was returned. It says, '2000 Model 1892 lever-action Winchester rifles.' My God—I wouldn't sell two thousand Winchesters in twenty years!"

No, Ben agreed silently, but Seth Rankin might. "Obviously a mistake," he murmured. "Can I look through those records?"

"Go ahead. I have nothing to hide."

Customer invoices were kept in a separate file, and Ben turned quickly to that, trying to match up the incoming rifles with an

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outgoing order. It took him only a few moments to find it. "Here it is. The rifles were delivered by Rankin to a customer who signed himself Hank Yeltsa. Name mean anything to you?"

"Not a thing. You're telling me the rifles weren't returned?"

"It seems not. Seth Rankin entered a false refund from the company in your books, noting the return of a mistaken shipment. It balanced the original charge so you neither gained nor lost, but the company never got its rifles back."

"What did this man Yeltsa want with them? The Indian Wars are over."

"But there are others to take their place. I was reading in the *Bee* about this Pullman violence in Chicago—"

He was interrupted by Lizzie Benson, who tapped gently on the door and then entered. "Cyrus, do you have the key for the gun cabinet? Theresa thinks it should be dusted."

He got to his feet. "Here it is. I think we're done talking anyway, aren't we, Snow?"

"That's up to you," Ben said with a shrug.

Lizzie had hurried off with the key and Clant said to him, "What about her? That's what I hired you for, not this business about invoices."

"Do you think she killed Seth Rankin?"

"He knew her real identity."

"Or claimed to know it. Is that enough of a motive for murder?"

"To the real Lizzie Borden it might be."

Ben left him there, promising to return. He needed some fresh air, and a new perspective on things. Perhaps Clant was right. Perhaps the solution was the obvious one, and he just didn't want to admit it.

The afternoon newspaper carried reports of an armed clash between striking Pullman workers and two thousand deputies newly appointed by the United States marshal. The Chicago superintendent of police was incensed by the action, claiming the deputies were actually in the pay of the railroads and that they were nothing but "thugs, thieves, and ex-convicts."

Ben Snow read the item twice. On the third try he realized why it bothered him. Two thousand deputies. Two thousand Winchester rifles.

Was it possible?

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If the railroads were buying weapons to arm the strikebreakers, they'd do it secretly, of course. Through a third party. Omaha might be just the right distance from Chicago. Far enough on the map, yet close enough by a special train.

Ben told Cyrus Clant he'd stop by the house after dinner, as he had on the previous night. He watched from across the street while Clant left the store with Lizzie and Theresa Sanchez followed behind them, pausing only to lock the door. But when they reached Clant's carriage Ben heard Lizzie ask for the key, claiming she'd forgotten her purse.

Ben crossed the street and moved quickly to the side of the building, careful not to be seen. Clant was pulling away with Theresa, calling out that he'd return for Lizzie shortly. She unlocked the door and reentered the hardware store. It was still bright daylight and she had no need to turn on the lamp.

He gave her ten carefully measured seconds and then stepped through the door after her. She'd just reached the display of axes beyond the counter where Rankin had been fatally attacked, and she was lifting one in her hand.

Before she could speak he heard another voice behind him and realized he hadn't been the only one to enter through the unlocked door. "Hold it right there, Miss Lizzie Borden!" Sergeant Hastley said, covering her with his revolver. "Move aside, Mr. Snow."

"What's going on here?" Ben asked innocently.

But Hastley ignored him for the moment. "Put down that axe, Miss Borden, very slowly. On the counter."

She obeyed him. "I only came back for my purse."

"Is it large enough to conceal an axe? What were you going to do with it later tonight, after Cyrus had gone to sleep?"

"That's not true!" she shouted. "You all try to say I killed them, that I'll kill again. It isn't so!"

Hastley smiled slightly. "Well, it doesn't matter now, does it?"

"Wait a minute," Ben interrupted. "How did you know she was Lizzie Borden? Through good detective work?"

"I know. I saw her picture."

"You were shown her picture by Seth Rankin. That was when you decided to kill him with an axe and frame her for the killing. Isn't that right, Mr. Hank Yeltsa?"

Sergeant Hastley was smiling as he turned the revolver and aimed it at Ben Snow's forehead. He was just an instant too slow. The little derringer hidden in Ben's hand fired once and it was over.

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* * *

It was Cyrus Clant who forced his way through the ring of police officers to Ben's side sometime later. "They say you shattered his gun hand with a single bullet. That true, Mr. Snow?"

"It's one of the things I do for a living," Ben answered him.

"But why Sergeant Hastley? And how'd you know?"

"Rankin wouldn't have let just anyone into the store after closing last night. But he certainly wouldn't bar the door to a man who'd just bought two thousand Winchester rifles from him to arm the Chicago strikebreakers. The railroads paid Hastley for the weapons to conceal their own involvement, in case there was mass violence during the strike. He had Rankin order them through the store and pay the manufacturer directly, fixing the books so it would look like they were returned. Rankin knew too much, or maybe he wanted too much. Either way, Hastley decided to kill him. Knowing Lizzie Borden was in town gave him a perfect scapegoat."

"What made you suspect him in the first place?"

"Last night when we entered the store he was bent down behind the counter where Rankin had been hit with the axe. We may have thought he was examining the floor, but today I learned a spindle of invoices was kept on a shelf right at that point. The spindle's puncture holes hinted that one invoice may have been removed and the others hastily replaced. It seemed to me that a store employee needn't have been that hasty, but Sergeant Hastley might have been, if we almost caught him in the act."

"He was Seth's customer for the guns?"

Ben nodded. "The transaction no doubt took place on a railroad siding, where the weapons were off-loaded and put on a special train to Chicago. Hastley signed himself Hank Yeltsa. Yeltsa, H. That's Hastley spelled backwards. I read an item in the *Bee* about a new businessman's organization named for Nebraska spelled backwards and that gave me the idea. Maybe it gave Hastley the idea too."

"I don't know how to thank you, Mr. Snow," Cyrus said.

"I'll total up my bill and let you know."

Ben saw Lizzie only one more time, at the railroad station two mornings later. The Pullman strike had been broken by 14,000 government troops and the trains to Chicago and points west were running again. "I guess we're traveling in opposite directions," she said.

Ben Snow nodded. "I have a horse to pick up. How about you?"

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"It would never have worked with Cyrus. I'm going back home to live with my sister. I should have known there'd be no new life for me."

"Maybe you didn't go far enough west."

She shook her head. "There'll always be someone who remembers the picture, and the trial. Someone who doesn't trust me around axes." Her face turned serious for a moment. "Thank you, Ben. He would have killed me the other night and framed me for Seth's murder."

"That was the plan."

She listened to a far-off voice. "I think they're calling my train."

"Lizzie—"

"No more of that! My name is Lizbeth Andrew Borden now, and shall be until I die."

Ben watched her hurry along the platform toward the rest of her life.

DETECTIVERSE

AUGUST 3, 1892

by DIXIE J. WHITTED

Said Abby to Andrew, "My dear.
Lizzie's been acting—well, queer.
The store bread looked nice
So I asked for a slice;
—The cleaver passed right by my ear . . ."

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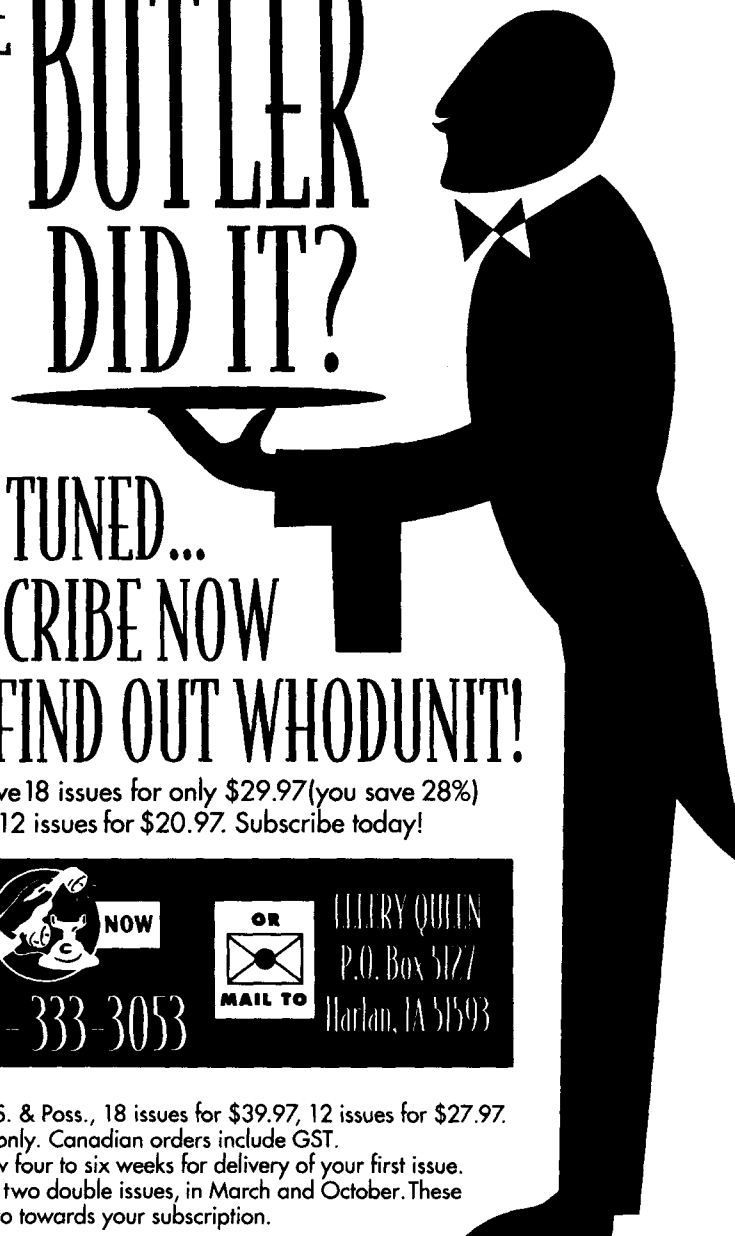
THE BUTLER DID IT?



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a *NEW* short story by

BLANCHE BOSHINSKI

Coloradoan Blanche Boshinski wrote children's stories before trying her hand at adult mysteries. Here she spins a tale of a child caught up in a very adult game—one that has deadly consequences. . .

THE HUNTER

by BLANCHE BOSHINSKI

Dillon Wymer's two-hour stint of concentration snapped.

The wind gusting through gaps around the storefront window had rattled his memory along with the shades. The remembered sound and smell of rifle shot racked his senses and recaptured the terrible look of surprise on Doug's face the moment before his body sagged toward the rough cabin floor.

Dillon swiveled his chair away from the desk and stared in bewilderment at the blizzard that blocked his view of other small shops across the street. The few cars parked at the curb already had lost identity beneath drifting snow.

Part of Dillon's mind remained locked into ideas for the Acme Furniture brochure he'd been struggling to write, and his split consciousness betrayed him.

He saw the dark shape of the hunter taking form as it plodded toward him through the white fury. Dillon leaped from his chair but checked a cry as the figure materialized into Cy Meyers heading for his TV repair shop next door.

Dillon shivered inside his baggy gray sweatshirt. He dropped his ungainly frame back into the chair and rubbed his angular face with hands permanently blackened from work on the press and copiers in the back room.

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"Will I ever be free of the hunter?" he shouted inwardly.

So many years had gone by since that day of the mountain storm when he was nine. Inside the primitive log cabin the smoke had swirled from cracks in the black, wood-burning stove. Now, more than a thousand miles away, Dillon gasped for breath and heard the wind thrashing the pines and rattling the metal chimney stuck up through the cabin roof.

He banged his fist on the desk to purge the images, jumped up, and stomped to the small heater on the back wall of his cramped office to turn up the thermostat.

"Might as well spend the night here," he told himself as he jammed the plug into the coffee maker that balanced on the corner of his cluttered desk. "No reason to fight the snow. Lynne isn't waiting for me at home anymore."

He turned on a single light over his writing pad as dusk filtered into the storm. Sounds grew muffled. Streetlights glowed eerily through the heavy condensation beginning to mask the window. Dillon became cocooned in a timeless sarcophagus.

He reached for yesterday's egg sandwich in the lower desk drawer. As he groped, a stack of worn file cards strapped with a rubber band touched his hand, and he took them out instead.

After shuffling the stack, he cleared a place on his desk with a brush of his arm, peeled off three cards, and slapped them onto the desk. Each had a hand-printed sentence on one face.

I sold an old car with bad brakes to a young father.

I secretly murdered my brother-in-law who often beat up my sister.

I didn't try to save money so that my talented daughter could go to college.

The hunter's rich, compelling voice came to Dillon from the past.

"Think about it. Which is the worst evil?"

Which? Which? Which? The constant question ever since. The question that drove Lynne away.

"Don't you ever act without all that soul searching?" Lynne had asked, trying to control her frustration. "Why not do something just on gut feeling?"

"I can't forget," Dillon told her once again, never able, or rather always afraid, to explain further.

He wouldn't do Councilman Eman's big printing job, even if they did need the money. The sheets would mislead readers about the real issue on the charter amendment.

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Which? Hurting Lynne or taking a job for Calkins, who took kickbacks on federal projects?

"I was a kid. The game is burned into my mind."

It was the only reason he could offer her.

All five men who had found shelter in the one-room cabin were in the mountains to shoot elk, but Dillon thought only of his rescuer as "the hunter."

The men sat around a scarred wooden table in the center of the room. Dillon, aching with cold, sat curled at the end of a sagging sofa a few feet away where he had been carried and deposited. He pulled the hunter's heavy sweater closer around his shoulders and sniffed its rank odors.

"Conscience is the name of the game," the hunter said.

Dillon watched him scratch at his rust-colored beard. It clung in wet curly strands from ear to ear and hid his broad face, except for the blue eyes caught amid deep eroded lines.

The white-haired old man at the far end of the table picked up one of the cards the hunter had tossed out from his deck as samples. After a quick glance, the old man shoved it back across the table.

"Doesn't look like a game to me." He rubbed the back of his hand over his bulbous nose. "Got any real cards around here?"

"It's more like a research project than a game," the hunter admitted.

He had taken off his dark parka to get to the heavy sweater he'd wrapped around Dillon. Now, he folded back the sleeves of his red and black plaid shirt.

"That's why I'm paying you each ten bucks a hand for six hands."

The hunter picked up the cards he had tossed out and shuffled them back into the deck.

"You some kind of professor?" Cutter asked with a growl.

Cutter Mosley was physically scrawny, but his meanness had grown into a giant in nineteen years.

"I'm no stinking guinea pig," seventeen-year-old Doug said, echoing his brother's defiant attitude. He shifted his squat body on the camp chair across the table from Cutter.

Dillon's anger kindled at the sound of his stepbrothers' voices. He wasn't scared of them now with the hunter nearby. Maybe, someway, he could tell the hunter his awful secret about the Mosleys.

"Did they want me to freeze to death?" Dillon asked the hunter after he was found. "Why didn't they come?"

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The man had come stomping through the swirling snow toward the devastated campsite long after Dillon had given up trying to set up the downed tent that was laden with heavy wet snow.

"I imagine those two ruffians give you a hard time," the hunter said, evading a direct answer. He hoisted Dillon onto his back for the hike to the cabin.

"I grew up in foster homes," the man said as he shifted Dillon's weight a bit and took a tentative step into a drift. "I know about living with people who don't want you."

The road ahead was blocked by a snowslide, the hunter told him. The vehicles couldn't be shoveled out until the storm ended, probably early evening. As the hunter stumbled, Dillon clamped his numb legs around the man's waist and hugged his neck.

"Keep talking," the hunter ordered. "Don't go to sleep.

"What TV programs does a boy your age watch?" he wanted to know.

The hunter had a son almost ten. But his wife had taken him with her years before when she left the hunter, and the man had never seen his son again.

"What do you like about school? Do you play football?"

Dillon kept trying to answer, but he felt dreamy and wanted to be jogged along forever, holding on to the hunter.

"Maybe I'm his son," he thought wistfully, knowing better.

A short five weeks before the hunting trip, Dillon hadn't known Cutter and Doug existed. No one had ever threatened to cut off his ear if he told how two turkeys were killed with a slingshot. He had never before been kicked for being in someone's way.

But in September, his mother was working at the Albuquerque fair. Dillon stood around the cattle stalls, watched the horse shows, or sat in his mother's Magic Mixer demo booth doing schoolwork she assigned him.

The second day of the fair, Les Mosley started hanging around the booth whenever his prize-winning Santa Gertrudis cattle didn't need attention. He'd raise a huge chapped hand to the brim of his gray Stetson, as if tipping the hat to Dillon's mom.

Les was a real rancher, all right, with straw sticking to the soles of his black hand-stitched boots and the smell of stock clinging to his tan suede jacket. When his mom said they would be going to Wyoming with Les when the fair ended, Dillon felt good about it.

One time, during reminiscences after their marriage, Lynne had said, "You sound happy talking about going to the ranch."

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"Lynne, when Les turned the pickup off the highway toward that large stone house, I swear it looked like a castle in the bottom of a big mountain bowl, and the cottonwoods along the creek held a fortune of shiny gold leaf."

"You have a great way with words," Lynne said, and kissed him.

"Hugo was riding in the back," Dillon said. "When I opened the door of his carrier, it was the first time in his life that my little mutt could run free."

"You should have taken up Les's offer to send you to the university," Lynne said, keeping to her own side of the conversation. "You could have been another Tolstoy."

"I'd never seen Mom so happy," he said wistfully. And to himself he thought, "If she hadn't been, I could have acted differently."

In the warmth of the cabin, Dillon drifted in and out of his short past into the present as the hunter's game began.

"This is stupid," Doug said. "Who'd confess to such stuff?"

"For sixty bucks I'll play Slap with a pig," the short man with long dark hair said. He sat at right angles to the hunter, next to Cutter and with his back to Dillon. His wet jacket smelled like a dirty, wet dog. "Just tell me the rules."

Limbs suddenly raked against the cabin wall. The sound startled Dillon, and he shivered with the same kind of fear that had overwhelmed him when the tent collapsed and trapped him under the heavy wet snow.

Even Doug had complained about the campsite.

"I can't pound pegs into rocks," he said as he threw down the hatchet he was using for a sledge.

But Cutter wouldn't take time to find another spot.

"Cutter said they'd be back by dark," Dillon told the hunter who found him huddled under a ponderosa. "They said to have a fire built and the can of water hot."

The hunter was explaining the game.

"Each player draws a card and reads it aloud. The role of judge moves around the table after each hand. The judge decides which confession is the worst moral outrage."

"Dillon. Dillon Wymer!"

His name was almost lost in the wind.

"Here, under the tree." His weak voice blew back at him. He was exhausted after struggling to get out from under the fallen tent. All feeling had left his hands. He looked to see if his feet were still in his worn sneakers.

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"Dillon," the voice insisted. The hunter was shaking his arm. "Wake up and drink this hot coffee."

"What's the point of it?" Cutter asked. "Who wins?"

"I collect information for my project," the hunter said as he tucked his sweater around Dillon's legs before going back to the table. "That's the point for me. You get to learn something about yourself and your fellow man, and there's the money, of course."

The confessions the men read confused Dillon. Was it really worse to cheat on an exam to get into med school than to rob a bank? Who was more dangerous, a speeding driver or a kidnapper?

"Look at the long-range implications," the hunter said over and over again as the men argued.

Doug yelled at Cutter. "Driving drunk isn't like cheating on your income taxes. I always knew you were a fool!" His voice was ugly, just as it was when Hugo had been missing for two days.

"Probably got chewed up by a coyote," he told Dillon. Then added under his breath, "Or accidentally shot."

The third night without a warm spot at the foot of his bed, Dillon went outside way after midnight. Maybe Hugo was hurt or hiding out by the corrals.

Finally, after searching and calling way beyond the ranch buildings, Dillon sat and leaned against the tool shed. With his arms across bent knees, he put his head down and cried.

When the sobs quit, he shivered with cold and looked up. In the glow of the nearly full moon, he saw a figure limp across the rise to the south, stumble through the yard, and slip into the house by way of the back door. No light came on. Dillon scrambled to his feet and raced to the silent, dark house.

It wasn't until the next day that Dillon knew he had an awful secret.

"If I wrote the confessions, this would be a lot more fun," Cutter said as he poked another log into the stove and the smoke rolled out into Dillon's face.

"Then write one," the hunter ordered, as he tossed blank cards out onto the table. "Everyone contribute an evil deed." Then he added, "But no sex and no religion."

The old man suddenly leaped from his chair as he pointed to the window.

"An elk rack!" he yelled. "He just passed the window."

Snow tumbled into the cabin as Doug yanked open the door. The wind doused all warmth as the men, including the hunter, grabbed

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their rifles from beside their chairs or along the wall and dived into the blizzard.

Dillon unwound himself and slid from the sofa. He set his coffee cup on the table and quickly printed on a blank card: "I know who was with Julia, but I haven't told."

He slipped the card into the deck and jumped back onto the sofa.

At the ranch a phone call came the morning after Dillon's hunt for Hugo. Cutter's girl had been killed in a car accident on the range road by the Old Mine Bridge. The driver had run off. No one knew who had been driving Julia's car.

Anger dwarfed any grief Cutter felt.

"If I ever find out who was with her, I'll kill him."

Cutter slammed the kitchen door as he stormed out. In a few minutes he was spurring Diablo at a run along the road leading to the high pasture where the three men raced their horses.

"Cutter won't ever get another girl as pretty as Julia," Doug said.

The old man came back into the cabin first.

"I was danged sure I saw something," he said to the others, who followed him in, stamping their feet and brushing snow from their clothes.

"There wasn't any elk out there you blind old jackass," Cutter spit out.

The old man didn't look up, but gave a sigh as he sat down at the table, licked his pencil point, and began writing his confession.

"Do we really have to go on with this?" the short man asked, but he, too, sat down and scribbled a few words.

Doug was last to finish. He tossed his card to the hunter and then immediately said, "Wait, I changed my mind."

"Too late," the hunter said and gave the deck a quick shuffle.

"I don't know what your purpose is," the short man said to the hunter. He sat with his chair tilted back and his arms folded across his chest. "But you're getting flawed information."

"How's that?" asked the hunter.

"Extenuating circumstances. No act exists by itself, it's a meld of events."

"You think so?" the hunter said, a fierceness in his voice. "Well, I take full responsibility for my acts. I don't blame anyone else."

"Who cares?" Cutter said. "Cut the talk and get this over."

Each man drew a card. The hunter moved Dillon's coffee cup out of the way and glanced over to the sofa. Dillon's heart raced. He had

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made a terrible mistake and willed his card to be at the bottom of the deck.

Cutter read first. "I killed innocent people during my military career."

Then the hunter. "Even though I had the flu, I visited an elderly couple to sell insurance."

The short man held his card sideways to catch a meager shaft of light from the window behind him. "Can't make all of this out," he said as he squinted. "I—then something I can't read—was with Julia, but I . . . "

Dillon could never be certain about the sequence of events after that, but in his mental reenactments, Cutter's chair flew back as he jumped up. The pistol from his belt was aimed at Doug.

"I loved Julia!" he yelled. "You killed her!"

Doug struggled to stand as his feet tangled in the legs of the camp chair. He caught himself against the table. Then came the blast of a rifle, and Doug crumpled on down toward the floor with that terrible look of surprise.

The office door burst open and crashed against the wall. Wind swooped around Dillon with shocking cold.

"I knew you'd still be here." Lynne pushed her snowy scarf back over her hair onto the collar of her all-weather coat and leaned against the door to shut it. "I brought pizza."

Her overly bright voice was husky from cold, and her dark eyes avoided Dillon as they always did when she made up after a quarrel.

Dillon stared at his wife. He couldn't place himself in space or time.

"The hunter shot Doug," he blurted out. "He did it for me, so Cutter would never know the truth."

"What? What are you talking about, Dillon?"

Lynne put the pizza box on the desk and sat down in the wooden chair beside the desk.

"You told me Doug was killed in a hunting accident." She leaned forward and looked into his face. "Are you ill, Dillon?"

"Afterward, he laid his gun on the table. He told Cutter that he knew about having the woman you love stolen." Dillon continued as if unaware of Lynne.

" 'They all have to die,' he said."

"He shot Doug for that?" Lynne whispered.

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"It was the reason he gave, but in an instant, just before he fired, when Cutter jumped up, the hunter looked at me. He saw my fear. He'd seen my cup on the table. I think he saw the card with the juvenile printing when it was turned so the short man could see. It was gone when I picked up the others."

Dillon wiped his clammy hands on his jeans, stood up, and began to pace as he talked.

"The hunter made a split-second decision to wipe out my terror."

Lynne sat back in her chair. Her folded arms across her chest were the only protection she had from the words he'd promised himself never to tell her.

"Cutter's mouth dropped open. The old man grabbed his own rifle but didn't raise it when the hunter pulled on his jacket and pushed the short man out of his way as he moved toward Doug."

" 'Just keep your mouths shut,' the hunter told the men. He stooped, then lifted and heaved Doug's bloody body over his shoulder. 'Someone will find him in the spring.' "

Dillon kept pacing as Lynne put both hands up to cover her open mouth, as if to block even a silent cry.

"I wanted to stop the hunter from going. I wanted him to take me with him. I was too scared to know what I wanted, except to wish for the time before I wrote my confession.

"The hunter reached inside his jacket, pulled out a roll of bills, and tossed them onto the table."

"Who was the hunter?" Lynne asked quietly.

"He'd ridden to the old man's cabin in the short man's four-wheel drive. No one knew the hunter or where he came from."

Dillon sighed and stopped in front of Lynne as his story neared the end.

"No one spoke. They began digging out the vehicles even though the storm hadn't ended. Cutter didn't say a word on the two-hour drive home."

"Then he went into the army?"

Dillon nodded. "The next week. And in the spring, a hiker found Doug at the base of a steep cliff."

Suddenly, as if really seeing Lynne for the first time and realizing what he'd told her, Dillon turned away.

"Why did you come here?" he said, almost as an accusation.

"Because I love you."

She took off her coat and tried to wrap it around his shaking shoulders, but he pushed it away.

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"You're a good, honest man, Dillon. It was wrong for me to criticize you for that."

"I don't know if you were, Lynne, but the hunter was wrong," Dillon said. He picked up the cards and began tearing them into pieces. "His game is flawed."

"You're not going to tell anyone else, are you?" Lynne asked. "It's been so long."

He shook his head.

Lynne gathered the torn cards, then took his hand.

"Come on, Dillon. Let's say goodbye to the hunter forever."

He let her pull him across the room. He opened the door. As Lynne threw the hunter's game into the wind, Dillon's mind was already writing a new confession.

I let my past hurt someone I love.

"Now, let's have pizza," Lynne said, trying for lightness. "It's pepperoni with double cheese."

Dillon closed out the winter havoc and locked the door.

"Right, but first . . . " He wrapped his arms around Lynne and for a moment thought of the future.

He would try not to hurt her again. But it would be a balancing of daily life against the brittle splinter of truth forever kicking his soul. Because Dillon knew whenever he closed his eyes, it would be Les limping across the yard that night Julia died.

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a *NEW* short story by

IAN STUART

It is with great sadness that we note the recent death of a writer whose often warmhearted, always insightfully told stories for our magazine will be missed by us all. Ian Stuart wrote for us under his own name and the pseudonym Malcolm Gray. He was a delight to work with and an author whose dozens of novels and many stories will be read, we are sure, for many years to come. The following vivid story is one of his last works of fiction. . . .

SECOND HONEYMOON

by IAN STUART

To say I was surprised when Helen Lanyon told me she and Mike were going back to Onaig for a holiday would be an understatement. I was amazed. After all, there can't be many couples who with their marriage on the rocks go back to the place where they spent their honeymoon.

It had been Mike's suggestion, she said. She was as surprised as I was. So why did I have the feeling that she had put the idea in Mike's head? Did she hope that Onaig would rekindle memories and breathe life into their dying relationship? It was later Mike told me she had mentioned the village so often he would have had to be pretty dense not to get the message. And one thing Mike wasn't was dense.

Naturally, I didn't know any of this at the time. Most of it I learnt during those terrible interviews in the prison hospital. My name is Paul Geary and I was the Lanyons' lawyer. I had known them for several years and we saw a good deal of each other, but we weren't exactly friends. Truth to tell, I didn't care for either of the Lanyons much. They weren't my type, they were too hard-nosed and self-

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absorbed. On the whole, I liked Mike better than Helen. But that was probably only sexism rearing its ugly head: I couldn't take aggressive women who were obsessed with money and their careers. I was happily married myself and I daresay a bit smug about it.

Mike was hardly a demanding client. Over the years he had dabbled occasionally in property development on a very small scale, and a few years ago I had drawn up his will. He wanted to ensure that if anything happened to him his estate passed to Helen with the minimum of fuss. Which shows it was some years ago.

Helen hadn't made a will. She was one of those people who can't bring themselves to face the fact of their own mortality. In any case, she had no close family; both her parents had died in a plane crash in 1984. If she died before Mike, he would inherit everything she left; if she didn't, it would go to her next of kin, her cousin Tracy.

Onaig is on an island in the Scottish Highlands, a row of white-washed cottages nestling between a tiny harbour and the steep slope of Ben Onaig a hundred miles from nowhere. The hotel, small, stone-built, and Victorian, is perched a couple of hundred feet up the brae. It was hardly Helen's scene. Perhaps she really did hope it would revive their marriage. Or maybe she hankered for the days when her life with Mike seemed to promise everything they wanted. Which was unlikely too; Helen wasn't that sentimental. Remote villages where the nightlife consisted of drinking in hotel bars to the accompaniment of Gaelic bands appealed to her about as much as children or a diet of cold porridge. They were a drag.

Mike wondered if she could know about Tracy and him. After all, they saw a good deal of each other. Tracy Collins was Helen's cousin and her sole surviving relative apart from him.

Helen had introduced them. Mike wondered about that too. It was almost as if she had been deliberately bringing them together, inviting Tracy to that party three months ago, then going away for a fortnight, leaving him on his own with Tracy only a couple of streets away in her new flat. She must have seen they were attracted to each other that first evening; Helen wouldn't have missed that.

Tracy was tall and slim, with the dark, languorous beauty Mike always found irresistible. Beside her Helen looked pale, almost washed out. Maybe she thought Tracy would provide a distraction, keeping Mike's thoughts off her while she was having fun with Clive Benson. Not that Mike cared any longer.

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He had no illusions where his wife was concerned. They had been married only a few weeks when she made it clear that she had married him for his money. Not entirely, she quite liked him and he attracted her physically, but mainly. Love was something Helen didn't understand.

Mike being the man he was, at first the situation amused him. He was a wealthy young man. Lanyon's had been a thriving business when he inherited it, and it had grown considerably since then. Like Helen, he was an only child and his parents were both dead.

By the time Helen introduced him to Tracy the amusement had changed to bitterness. They quarrelled more often and more angrily. And it was always Helen who capitulated in the end; she had no intention of jeopardising her position.

"She keeps on about Onaig," he told me once when we met at a business lunch. "Damned if I can see why."

I couldn't either. Not then.

They decided to go for ten days the next month. As Helen said, feigning surprise at Mike's suggestion, it would make a change, and they could always go to the Caribbean or Sardinia as usual in the autumn. She was clever enough not to appear too pleased, but Mike saw the glint of satisfaction in her eyes. If only she knew, he thought.

The tourist season was only just getting under way in the Highlands in early May, and Mike's secretary was able to reserve the room they had occupied before at the Ben Onaig Hotel. Somehow Helen had come up with the number. She arranged to take her car up to Inverness on the overnight Motorail train on the Friday and drive to Oban from there. Her Rover 214 convertible was more convenient than Mike's big Jag.

On the Thursday afternoon he left his office early and took a taxi to Tracy's flat in Pimlico. She was even more affectionate and exciting than usual and Mike was delighted. They spent a very enjoyable two hours, then he went home.

"It won't be long now," he told her as he was leaving.

Tracy kissed him as if she hadn't seen him for months. "I can't wait, darling," she breathed.

Mike had to admit that Helen put on a wonderful act when they reached the hotel. If he had not known differently, she would almost have convinced him that she was happy just for them to be there together.

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But then, of course, she was.

Even when they were alone she maintained the pretense without ever overdoing it. And he played up to her. Once in the lounge he saw an elderly lady smiling approvingly at them, and he nearly winked at her.

They had been there three days when after dinner Helen suggested, "Let's go for a walk, Mike. We could see if that path along the cliff's still there. The one we used to go along."

"It's bound to be," Mike said. "Nothing changes round here. Okay, let's do that." He had to humour her, he told himself.

They finished their coffee and set out. It had been a warm, sunny day, and although it wouldn't start getting dark for another couple of hours, it was much cooler now.

The path began a hundred yards from the hotel. It was reasonably smooth underfoot but too narrow for them to walk side-by-side. At first it climbed gently through a belt of spruce trees, but soon it became steeper and emerged from the trees onto the bare hillside. Mike looked at the rocks which protruded from the turf beside the path or lay strewn on it. Lumps of granite, wickedly sharp-edged, some of them only as big as his hand, some several feet across, and he smiled to himself.

At the seaward end of the headland the path turned a corner and widened out into a ledge four or five feet across. From the edge there was a sharp drop of several hundred feet to the shore, where the sea churned angrily round the rocks. Its incessant roar reached them clearly.

When they reached the ledge they stopped and looked across the sound to the mainland a couple of miles away. White houses nestled under grassy slopes and, nearer at hand, the sail of a small dinghy dipped rhythmically in the gentle swell.

"You could push somebody over with one hand," Helen had observed the first time they came this way. Mike remembered that now.

She put her handbag down on the ground while she removed a tiny piece of grit from one of her shoes. The bag rolled over and she set it up straight.

"I'm ready for a drink," Mike said. Something about this place was getting to him, he thought. He'd be glad to get back to the hotel's bar and a large Scotch.

Helen picked up her bag. The clip had sprung open and the bag wasn't quite closed. She fastened it and they set off back down the path.

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* * *

The next day was even warmer. After breakfast Mike hired a sailing dinghy and they took it out on the bay. While he fished, Helen lay back on some cushions in the bow, reading *Vogue* and sunbathing. She looked fantastic, he thought. The dramatic black and white swimsuit she was wearing this morning showed off her smooth, creamy skin, and her pale gold hair hung in loose waves to her shoulders. Her big sunglasses added a hint of mystery. For a moment his resolution wavered. Then he thought of Tracy and it returned.

He fished for two hours and caught only two small fish. His lack of success didn't trouble him, he wasn't an imaginative man and it didn't occur to him that it might be an omen. Anyway, his plan was foolproof.

He read for a while, then they ate the packed lunch they had brought from the hotel and drank a bottle of Muscadet. Mike wondered what Helen was thinking behind those impenetrable dark glasses.

"The ferry's coming in," he remarked.

His wife raised herself on one elbow. Half a mile away the black-hulled ship glided almost silently toward the harbour.

"Wouldn't it be strange if there were somebody we knew on it," she said.

"Very, but it's hardly likely," Mike said. Stranger things happened, he thought.

"No, of course not," Helen agreed.

They watched the ferry dock and a handful of passengers go ashore. A few of them climbed into cars, the rest walked off. New passengers went aboard. She backed slowly away from the jetty, turned, and headed out into the bay as silently as she had come. Her wash fanned out across the water.

"Did you tell Tracy we were coming here?" Helen enquired casually.

Mike was startled. "Tracy?" he repeated. "No. I haven't seen her for weeks. Why?"

Helen's lovely lips curved into a smile. "Haven't you?" she asked.

"No." Mike wondered if his wife had had him followed.

"Feminine intuition. I know you, darling."

It was on the tip of Mike's tongue to ask why, in that case, she had introduced him to Tracy. But that would have been too much like playing with fire. Tracy was a subject best avoided just now.

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"We'd better get back," he said. "It'll be drinks time before long."

"It's so lovely out here," Helen said dreamily.

"Glad we came?" Mike asked.

"Oh yes! It was a wonderful idea of yours. It's a perfect holiday."

"A second honeymoon?"

Helen laughed quietly. "Yes."

Mike packed away his fishing tackle and went forward to heave in the anchor. To do so he had to climb over Helen. She reached up, twined her arms round his neck, and pulled his head down to hers. Her lips were soft and warm.

"I'm glad we came, too," he said.

"Oh no!" Helen exclaimed.

"What is it?" Mike enquired.

"I've lost my ring," Helen said.

They were changing before going down to the bar before dinner.

"Which one?" Mike asked.

"The diamond and emerald one you gave me on our first anniversary. Oh, Mike!" Helen was close to tears.

"When did you have it last?"

"When we went out yesterday. I wanted to wear it for dinner, but it's a tiny bit loose, so I put it in my bag. It must have fallen out when my bag rolled over."

"It wasn't a very good place to put it," Mike said mildly.

"I know. But when you suggested we went for a walk I didn't want to come all the way back up here." Their room was on the third floor and there was no lift. "I thought it would be safe. If I'd known . . . "

"It was your idea we went," Mike pointed out.

"Was it? I've forgotten. I was so glad you wanted to go too." Helen's smile would have melted stone.

"I'll go and see if I can find it," Mike told her.

"Oh darling, would you? I can't very well go like this." Helen glanced down at her expensive designer dress and flimsy sandals. "It would break my heart to lose that ring."

Mike believed her; it had cost him over two thousand pounds. Not that there was much risk of its being lost; it was probably tucked away safely in her case at this moment. But he didn't suggest they looked there. He had seen her relax a little when he said he would go out to the headland. He didn't understand how, but he knew that had been the crucial moment. Did she intend to phone Clive Benson once he was out of the way? Benson couldn't be here in Onaig surely?

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Not that it would make any difference if he were.

"I shan't be long," he said. "I'll check that nobody's handed it in to reception first."

"I'll wait for you in the bar," Helen told him.

"You can buy a large Glenmorangie for me." Mike slipped on his jacket.

In the lobby the receptionist smiled at him. She was a pretty girl and in other circumstances he would have spent a few minutes chatting her up.

"My wife's lost a rather valuable ring," he explained. "I don't suppose anybody's found it and handed it in, have they? She thinks it must have fallen out of her bag on the path up to the headland."

The receptionist was a nice girl and looked upset. "Och dear, how awful!" she exclaimed. "Nobody's handed it in, Mr. Lanyon. Would you like Angus to help you look for it?"

"That's all right, thanks," Mike assured her. Things might have turned out very differently if he had agreed.

"I should ask Sergeant MacPherson at the police office," Mary said.

"I will if I don't find it," Mike agreed. "It's early days yet, we only just discovered it missing."

"I hope it turns up. Not many people go that way this time of year."

Outside the sun was still shining from an almost cloudless sky. Mike glanced at his watch: five to seven. Not that time was critical within a few minutes.

As he had expected, he met no one. At this hour the few visitors were comfortably settled in the bars of Onaig's two hotels, sipping their drinks and wondering what would be on the menu for dinner this evening. He strode on.

Mike prided himself on his fitness, but before he reached the end of the headland he was sweating. It wasn't the exercise, he told himself; he was on edge. Who wouldn't have been? It's not every day you plan to kill your wife. Still, it annoyed him, as if it were a sign of weakness.

Just short of the corner he slowed. Something seemed to be holding him back. It was as if by going on he would be crossing his own personal Rubicon, committing himself beyond the point of no return. He glanced over the edge of the cliff and saw the sea breaking over the rocks far below. Almost unconsciously, he wiped his mouth with the back of one hand.

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Round the corner he stopped dead. A girl was standing leaning against an outcrop of rock beside the path. That there was a girl didn't surprise him, he had expected to find one there, but this was a blonde with long hair and large round spectacles. She was wearing a long cotton skirt and a shapeless cardigan. Two-inch gold hoops dangled from her ears. A stranger.

"Hallo, Mike," Tracy said. She laughed. "Don't you recognise me?"

"No." For some reason that angered him, but after a moment he felt himself relax and he said easily, "I shouldn't think anybody else will either."

"I don't intend them to," Tracy said. "I've got it all worked out. Everything, Mike. At the hotel in Oban I'm Janice Hall, a redhead who knows how to dress. I'm going back on the next ferry; I'll change when it gets in. No one will connect the blonde who came over with Janice or either of them with the real me."

"Smart," Mike said approvingly. "I suppose Helen paid for the clothes?"

"Of course."

They had been in bed at Tracy's flat a fortnight ago when she said suddenly, "I'm going to kill you, angel."

At first he had thought she was joking. Until she explained. Helen had promised her £50,000 to kill him while she established her own alibi in the bar. Five thousand in advance, ten thousand when the job was done, and the balance when his will was proved and Helen inherited his estate. She was tired of him, she explained, and she wanted to marry Clive Benson. Unfortunately Clive was as poor as a church mouse. She wanted Mike's money. All of it, not what she would get from a divorce settlement.

After that it didn't seem like a joke any longer. He knew now why Helen had almost thrown Tracy and him together; she must have been plotting this all the time.

It had taken him just one day to see how he could turn the tables on her. It was a brilliant scheme, he told himself. Moreover, it would avoid the tedious business of divorce and his paying Helen an enormous sum as a settlement. He had no illusions where she was concerned, she would take him for every penny she could. She had had more than enough of his money already. A decent interval, then, if he still wanted to, he could marry Tracy.

When he told Tracy his plan she laughed delightedly. It didn't seem like murder. He would be acting in self-defence: if he didn't stop her, Helen would kill him sooner or later.

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She had told Tracy to distract his attention, hit him over the head with one of the loose rocks that littered the turf, and push his unconscious body over the edge of the cliff. If the fall didn't kill him, he would drown. When his body was found it would be assumed he had slipped, fallen, and hit his head on the rocks at the foot of the headland. The police up here wouldn't even consider the possibility of foul play. There probably hadn't been a major crime on Onaig for fifty years.

Mike had thought up some variations. In his plan, Tracy would kill Helen while he was talking to people at the hotel, then slip away to catch the last ferry.

"I'll get back," he said now. "Somebody may come along."

"There's nobody to come," Tracy told him. "I can see right down the path both ways from here. Look."

Instinctively Mike obeyed. It was true, the path and the slope above it were deserted. He turned back again.

What he saw froze him, and for a moment he couldn't move. Tracy's right arm was raised and in her hand she was clutching a small rock. He could see its edge, scalpel-sharp.

But it wasn't the rock that sent fear coursing through him. It was the expression in Tracy's eyes. They were burning, triumphant.

"I'm sorry, Mike," she said. "This is *my* plan. Why should I settle for a miserable fifty thousand when I can have it all? All your lovely money. And I know you, you'd walk out on me within a year. You die first, and Helen inherits. Then she dies and I do. Isn't it simple?"

Mike stared at her in disbelief. "Put that down, for God's sake," he said. His fear was like a chill deep inside him. "You don't know, I—"

Selfish to the last, Tracy thought. Thinking only of himself.

The rock crashed on his skull. His legs crumpled and he fell forward. His body struck the edge of the path and rolled over. Tracy watched it fall, hit the boulders, and disappear under the water. Then she threw the rock after it. It hit the water with a soft plop.

Helen was waiting in the bar as she had promised. Time passed; half an hour, forty minutes. People noticed that she looked worried. Twice she had gone out and gazed up the path to the headland. Eventually, she went to speak with Mary.

"That path's terribly slippery," she explained. "I'm afraid he may have fallen down and broken a leg or something."

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Mary knew what she really meant. "I'll ask Angus to see nothing's happened," she said. "You'd best be waiting in the bar just now, Mrs. Lanyon."

Angus was gone twenty minutes. When he returned he avoided Helen. He had no doubt about what he had seen: a man's body was spread-eagled over the rocks at the foot of the cliff. It was dressed in a shirt like the one Mr. Lanyon had been wearing earlier. The incoming tide was swirling over him and there was no chance of his being alive.

Angus went to see Sergeant MacPherson at the police office.

When the hotel manager broke the news to Helen, at first she seemed unable to take it in; when she did, her grief was terrible to see. She rejected all efforts to help her; she wanted only to be alone for a little while, she explained tearfully.

Tracy found her in the room she had shared with Mike. "You owe me ten thousand pounds," she said.

"No problems?" Helen felt no regret, only a buoyed-up and exciting tenseness.

"What could there be?"

"Nothing. I've got the money here." Helen turned to her suitcase on its stand beside the dressing table and unlocked it. She laughed quietly. "It's wrapped up with my ring," she said.

She didn't hear Tracy take a short-bladed knife from her satchel and come up behind her. The dark girl put her left hand over her cousin's mouth and drew the knife across the smooth flesh of her neck twice, the first time barely scratching it, the second cutting deep. A minute more and she had dragged Helen's body to the bathroom, laid it in the bath, and dropped the knife beside it. She waited just long enough to satisfy herself that there was no blood in the bedroom, then slipped out, closing the door behind her.

She saw no one on the landing or stairs. Not that it would have mattered if someone had spotted her, she thought. All they would see was an eccentrically dressed young woman they had never seen before. The £10,000 was stowed safely in her bag.

Ten minutes later she boarded the ferry.

When it docked at Oban she made for a public toilet. There she changed her cardigan and cotton skirt for a smart cream suit, her blond wig for an auburn one, and her Doc Marten boots for neat court shoes. Finally she slapped on some makeup and replaced her gold hoop earrings with discreet studs. Her discarded clothes she

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stuffed into a plastic bag she had already weighted with a large stone.

Her car was parked outside her hotel and she drove a few miles north to the viaduct at Connel. There was no other traffic and, stopping in the middle of the viaduct, she dropped the bag into the river.

The next morning she checked out of the hotel early and drove back to London.

A few days later, she received the letter I had written as Helen's administrator. It expressed my sympathy and informed her that as far as I could ascertain, Helen had made no will and, as her only surviving relative, Tracy was her sole heir. Tracy knew very well there was no will, she had made sure of that when Helen told her her plan and she had seen how she could turn it to her advantage.

The next day she came to see me.

"How much did she leave?" she asked, trying to sound casual. As if she understood it couldn't be much. "I hate to sound mercenary, but I've no idea."

"Just over a thousand pounds," I answered. "Plus some rather nice pieces of jewelry. There's a diamond and emerald ring that must be quite valuable."

Tracy stared at me. It was as if her whole world had been jerked away from under her like a rug and she was falling into an abyss.

"A thousand pounds?" she gasped. "I don't believe it. There must be hundreds of thousands, she inherited everything Mike left; you said he died first."

"I'm afraid she didn't." I felt almost sorry for Tracy, naked greed is never attractive. But then, I knew nothing of what had happened at Onaig. "Mr. Lanyon made a new will a fortnight before he died."

When she told him about Helen's scheme, Tracy thought wildly. By doing that she had ensured she received none of his fortune.

"Who gets it?" she demanded, her voice rising. There was a tight sensation in her head, as if pressure was building up in her skull.

"Various charities," I told her. "A fund for impoverished gentlewomen and another to help discharged prisoners. I must say, I didn't know Mike was interested in them."

Tracy began to laugh. He had been trying to tell her when she killed him. Crazy laughter rocked her body. It seemed she couldn't stop. She was still laughing when the police came. The pathologist had reported that, although Helen was right-handed, the wounds

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to her throat had clearly been inflicted by someone who was left-handed.

The other guests at the hotel insisted that the Lanyons were obviously devoted. "It's so nice to see a young couple who aren't afraid to let people see they love each other," a middle-aged American lady said. She sighed; it was a long time since her husband had told her he loved her.

It was tragically clear what had happened; Mike had died when he fell onto the rocks and Helen, overwhelmed by grief, had killed herself.

Wasn't the devotion a bit overdone? the police asked themselves. Almost like an act put on to impress the other guests. Nevertheless they had looked for a third person who might have had a motive. It didn't take long for Tracy's name to come up. She had made no secret of her relationship with Mike and she was chronically and deeply in debt. Also she was left-handed.

Delighted by her own cleverness, she had overdone her disguise. Several people remembered seeing the young woman in the shapeless clothes, the big glasses, and the huge earrings. One woman waiting for a friend near the toilets had actually seen her enter them and emerge, looking very different, ten minutes later. It must have been her, nobody else had entered or left the lavatory during the twenty minutes the lady waited for her friend.

Two days after that, while Oban was still buzzing with talk of the murders, a ten-year-old boy had found the plastic bag a few yards from the viaduct and carried it home. His father had taken it to the police.

It transpired that Tracy had a history of mental problems. Now her mind collapsed completely and she was deemed to be unfit to stand trial. The last time I saw her at the prison hospital, she didn't mention Helen or Mike.

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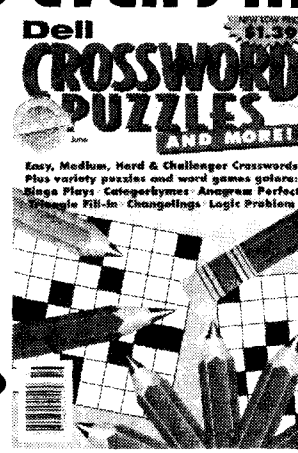
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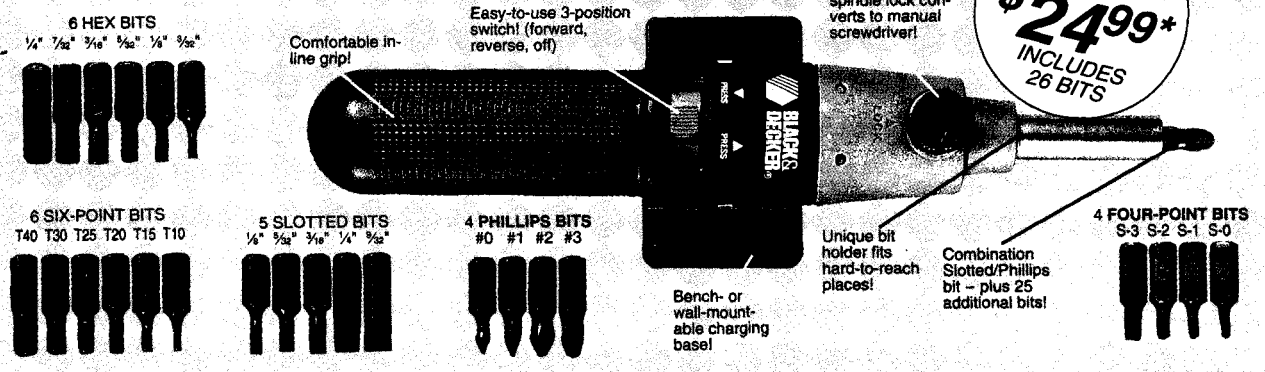
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